

# A Soft Pillow for Troubled Hearts and Suffering Bodies

by Lehman Strauss

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*Romans 8:28 teaches that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to His purpose.*

**Scripture:** Genesis 18:14, Psalm 119:71, John 13:7, Romans 8:28, 1 Corinthians 13:12, 1 Corinthians 15:51, Philippians 3:21, 1 John 3:2

**Topics:** "Gods Sovereignty", "Faith And Trials"

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## Description

Lehman Strauss preaches on the profound truth that understanding God's promises intellectually is different from experiencing them firsthand. Through the lens of Romans 8:28, he shares his personal journey of realizing the depth and reality of God's work in his life, emphasizing the importance of unwavering faith in God's sovereignty even in the midst of trials. Strauss delves into the significance of believers loving God and being called according to His purpose, highlighting the transformative power of God's providence in all circumstances. He explores the process by which God orchestrates all things for the good of those who trust Him, ultimately aiming for believers to be conformed to the image of Christ both now and in eternity.

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## Transcript

Truth explained is a far cry from truth experienced. The following chapter is from a message I prepared some time ago for the blessing and benefit of others.

Romans 8:28 was one of many verses Elsie and I claimed after her stroke, and we have repeated it often. When I was preparing this message, I did not have the slightest idea that God was going to use it in my own life. But our heavenly Father knew what lay ahead for me. Now I know much more about the real meaning of this text. That is because my knowledge is not only intellectual and academic, but it is also now experiential.

The text does not tell us how God works all things together for good--only that He does. With that assurance, no matter how deep the valley or how severe the trial, I will not doubt God's Word.

One day our Lord said, "What I do thou knowest not now; but thou shalt know hereafter" (John 13:7). My heavenly Father is sovereign, all-wise, and all-powerful, and He is in control of "all things." He will

accomplish His perfect will through our trials. And in His own time, He will show us how it worked for good.

One of the most quoted passages in the Bible is Romans 8:28-29: "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. For whom He did foreknow, He also did predestinate to be conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the firstborn among many brethren."

Where is there a Christian who has not heard it, in part at least? I would not conclude that all those persons who recite Romans 8:28 from time to time know and understand its meaning. Nevertheless, the frequency with which we hear it gives evidence that many at least know this verse is in the Bible.

This text is a part of a passage that speaks about the "sufferings of this present time" (8:18). All creation is said to be groaning (8:19-22). The Christian himself is groaning (8:23-25), and even the Holy Comforter "maketh intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered" (8:26).

Problems and pressures are felt in all areas of life. Tears, trials, and tribulations are seen on every hand. Most of us will admit that this is true. Of course, some persons live in a world of make-believe and say that such conclusions are merely "mind over matter." These people, I sincerely believe, are victims of satanic deception.

Despite the infirmities of life, however, no Christian needs to fear or live a life of defeat. Our text provides a soft pillow for troubled hearts and suffering bodies. We are assured that all of life's hardships and heartaches and heavy burdens are working "together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to His purpose." Here we see the providence of God at work. Here we learn that we must never think about "chance" or "luck" regarding those things that touch our lives.

As we examine the words of Romans 8:28, we discover five distinct emphases. Each of them is necessary to an understanding of the whole meaning of this wonderful passage of promise.

#### The Positiveness Involved

The text commences on a positive note: "We know." The word know, oida, means "to know with an absolute knowledge." It is not something we blindly accept merely because someone says it. This is knowledge gained by looking back, by the mental process of reflection.

There are some things about our lives that we do not know now. The passage of Scripture that forms the setting for our text says that "we know not what we should pray for as we ought" (Romans 8:26). Our Lord said, "Watch therefore: for ye know not what hour your Lord doth come" (Matthew 24:42). Then, just before His ascension, He added, "It is not for you to know the times or the seasons, which the Father hath put in his own power" (Acts 1:7). We all must say with the apostle, "Now I know in part" (1 Corinthians 13:12). Yes, in regard to many things, our vision and understanding are limited.

But Romans 8:28 tells us one thing we can know absolutely. This verse has become a household word among those who love God; a thing known by those who are "the called according to His purpose." So at once we rule out fate or chance as a force in human events. We may not be able to explain satisfactorily just how all things work together for good, but we know that they do. This knowledge comes through reflection and through faith in the Word of God. We know it because God said it. He has guaranteed it by His character. And if someone reading these lines is wondering how a rational person, knowing the grim facts of this world's present state, can make such a statement, I can only answer with confidence that I

believe God.

Whenever God declares Himself, we are very foolish to doubt His Word. No obstacle or opposition is powerful enough to prevent Him from carrying out His plan. Consider the case of Abraham. God had told the aged patriarch that he was to become the father of a son, and that Sarah would be the child's mother. Humanly speaking, the odds were against them--so much so that Sarah laughed at the Lord's prediction. Then God asked, "Is anything too hard for the Lord?" (Genesis 18:14). Why, of course not!

If God says it will be done, then it will be done. His Word will settle it in our minds once and for all, and we must reply confidently, "There is nothing too hard for thee" (Jeremiah 32:17). When God says that all things work together for good to them that love Him, we accept it in faith.

Not one of us knows how long he will live. Not one of us knows whether the years ahead will be spent in sickness or in health. None of us knows if tragedy will strike in the home. None of us knows if America will be spared from falling into the hands of communism. None of us knows if our beloved nation will be involved in a nuclear war. None of us knows if our national economy will survive or collapse. But this we do know: that all things (not some things, or many things, or most things, but all things) continue to work together for good to those who love God. Nothing is more necessary to the Christian's peace of mind than the absolute knowledge that all things of every description that touch his life are overruled by God for his good.

But in order that no one be led into a false security, we must examine the text further and see who is the subject in this verse.

#### The People Involved

To whom is this assuring word addressed? It is to "them that love God." Up to this point the apostle has been speaking about God's love for us (Romans 5:5, 8). But here the change appears, and it is an important one. It is important because mankind believes the lie that as long as God loves us, all will be well and ultimate good will come to us. This is not so! In this verse it is not the question of God's love for us, but of our love toward Him. We may be certain that God has never stopped loving mankind; nevertheless, we must remember that all the people who will go to hell will not be there because God did not love them. "If any man love not the Lord Jesus Christ, let him be Anathema" (1 Corinthians 16:22).

Likewise, all Christians are loved by God, but only those whose hearts are right toward Him can claim the promised blessing in our text. I submit to you, then, that the phrase "them that love God" does not refer to all believers but to a certain class of believers. All Christians are being loved by God at all times (Revelation 1:5), but not all whom He loves choose to love Him in return. Our Lord said to the church at Ephesus, "I have somewhat against thee, because thou hast left thy first love" (Revelation 2:4). Three times Christ explored Peter's heart with the searching question, "Lovest thou me?" (John 21:15-17).

Who are these Christians who love God? They are those who live in daily fellowship with Him, who walk with Him in trust and obedience. Our Lord said, "If ye love me, keep my commandments" (John 14:15). On another occasion, He said that the first and great commandment is to "love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind" (Matthew 22:37). There can be no doubt that faith in God and obedience to God are the real proofs of our love for Him. If a Christian loves and trusts God, then he will humbly accept all that God sends into his life. But if a Christian does not love and trust God, he will most likely resent the bitter trials of life.

The people involved are further described as "them who are the called according to His purpose." The called ones are not all those who were evangelized and invited, but those who obeyed the call and came to Christ, and who love and serve Him. The called, then, are the "effectually called," those who have responded to the call. By this they have accepted the blessings of the gospel which are for those who are in Christ.

Let's now consider a third factor in Romans 8:28.

#### The Particulars Involved

What percentage of those things that touch the Christian are working together for his good? The answer is "all things." This means all of them--without exception! A striking example of this is the case of Paul himself, the man who penned these words from God. Before his conversion, he had initiated a bitter persecution against the Christians. Although it caused the congregation of believers from Jerusalem to scatter to other parts of the world, this seeming calamity served only for the good of Christ's cause. The church was planted in scores of new places to prosper in its mission more than ever (Acts 8). When God says all things, He means all things, whatever they may be, including persecution. No limitations are placed on the particulars involved.

Consider the case of Paul's thorn in the flesh (2 Corinthians 12:7-10). This was most certainly a severe trial to him. Three times he had prayed, asking God to remove that particular affliction. No doubt he thought sincerely that it was a hindrance to him in his work of the gospel. But Paul had to learn, as each of us does, that God doesn't need human strength and physical well-being.

I have wondered at times if Paul, just before that experience of suffering, was not building up within him a bit of pride in his accomplishments and in the special revelations God had given him. When he wrote by inspiration concerning his suffering, he said, "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" (2 Corinthians 12:7). Notice that twice he said, "Lest I should be exalted above measure." The trial, therefore, was for the purpose of preventing pride. This was for the good of God's servant, because "pride goeth before destruction, and an haughty spirit before a fall" (Proverbs 16:18).

Of course, Paul could not see the good in his tribulation when he was on his knees begging God to take it from him. Even so, it was working for his good. He did see it afterward, for he testified, "Therefore, I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in necessities, in persecutions, in distresses for Christ's sake: for when I am weak, then am I strong" (2 Corinthians 12:10).

Then too, the apostle learned the sufficiency of God's grace in the hour of suffering. Yes, when God says all things, He means all things, including pain and physical handicap. No limitations are placed on the particulars involved.

Think also about the case of Joseph. His own brothers had conspired against him. Their hearts were filled with the awful evil of jealousy, and they sold him as a slave to the Ishmaelites for twenty pieces of silver. He was then taken to Egypt. During the years that followed, while Joseph's brothers did not know of his whereabouts, he was elevated to the official position of governor in Egypt. Many years later, when Joseph was united with his brothers, he testified, "But as for you, ye thought evil against me; but God meant it unto good, to bring to pass, as it is this day, to save much people alive" (Genesis 50:20). Yes, my

Christian brethren, when God says all things He means all things, including misunderstanding and ill-treatment by our very own loved ones. There are no limitations on the particulars involved.

Further light is shed upon the subject as we examine the process God uses.

### The Process Involved

We are told in our key verse that "all things work together for good." Now, nowhere does the text state that all things are good; but rather, that all things work together for good. Whatever the particulars involved may be, whether pain, poverty, persecution, misunderstanding, or death, they are not good in themselves. The idea is that God by His own supernatural processes intermingles all things in our lives for ultimate good. To state it another way, God makes each thing in our lives contribute to the good, for He is controlling the process. Only He knows the end from the beginning. Thus the bitter elements of life as well as the sweet blend together to produce the desired result.

Please look again at that word together, for it is the key to understanding the process involved. The isolated experience itself is not what accomplishes the result. It is that experience added to every other experience and their working together that produces the good. When I was a boy, I enjoyed watching Mother make a cake. First she would gather all the necessary ingredients for the cake. There would be the flour, baking powder, shortening, sugar, raw eggs, and extract for flavoring. Taken by itself, any one of those ingredients would be unpalatable. Have you ever tried eating a bowl of flour or a cup of shortening or a spoonful of baking powder? Any one of those ingredients eaten by itself would not taste good, but when they are properly intermingled and baked at the right temperature for the correct number of minutes, the finished product is delicious.

The experience of those who love God is that all things intermingle for good. You may not be very old, and yet you can look back on life and see that some things seemed to be disastrous, but they worked out to your edification and blessing. God's guiding hand was in it all. If we love God, all things, however contrary they may appear, are under His control for our good. Suffering and sorrow, trials and troubles do not hinder our spiritual progress; rather, they serve to carry out the plan of God for us. They are part of the course in God's school of grace, given to us that we might learn His ways.

David said with confidence in God, "It is good for me that I have been afflicted: that I might learn thy statutes" (Psalm 119:71). He was simply saying that all things, including his affliction, worked together for good. The good in his case was acquiring a greater knowledge of the ways and will of God. This is the divine process, and it cannot fail. Most things in the process of making do not bear the slightest resemblance to the finished product. Therefore, do not be disillusioned by the process involved. You can be certain that all of the parts are being intermingled by Him, and that they will produce a good and glorious finished product.

We conclude this look at our text with a final thought.

### The Purpose Involved

The text tells us that it is "His purpose" that we should be "conformed to the image of his Son" (Romans 8:29). The purpose of God will eventually be realized in all Christians. This will happen when Christ comes, and "we shall all be changed" (1 Corinthians 15:51-52) and "be like him" (1 John 3:2). God set this goal for His children before the worlds were made. I do not believe that Romans 8:28 was intended to be

an expression of philosophy or theology; rather, it was meant to be an expression of Christian experience. How tragic that so many have read into this passage the lie that God predestinates people to go to hell! He does no such thing. As a matter of fact, God has predestined all of His children to be conformed to the image of Jesus Christ. He wants us to be sons after the pattern of Christ. This is God's settled plan and purpose for all believers, and this is the way it will be when our Lord comes for His own (Philippians 3:21).

Even so, God wants Christ's likeness to be seen in us now. The point is that all things work together for good here and now to them that love Him, so that in this life the image of God's Son may be manifest in us. The moral character of Christ is to be manifest in believers now. We must not wait until the conformity is fully and finally accomplished in the rapture. The purpose of the process of sanctification is for the present life as well as for the life to come.

God has set limits or boundaries upon His people. For the Christian, certain things are out of bounds because they detract from the likeness of Christ in us by hindering the work of conformation. Conformation to the image of the Lord Jesus begins the moment a sinner is saved. It is the work of the Holy Spirit in us through the process called sanctification.

If we love the Lord as we ought to love Him, we should say with a glad heart, "Work on, O God! Blend all things together, the bitter with the sweet, until You have made me like the Lord Jesus Christ."

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