

## ‘All things ... for good’.

### INTRODUCTION

I want to focus on the first half of the familiar text of Romans chapter 8 verse 28:

‘And (better, ‘But’) **we know that all things work together for good to those who love God**, to those who are called according to His purpose’.<sup>1</sup>

‘Familiar’, I say; yes, indeed. But also, a text which, over the years, has occasioned very different responses in the hearts and minds of God’s people. Consider, for example, these two quotations from Bible scholars:

(i) ‘One of the most encouraging verses of all of Scripture’.<sup>2</sup>

(ii) ‘The hardest verse in the Bible to believe’.<sup>3</sup>

In your present circumstances, which of these two quotations best expresses your view of Rom. 8. 28? ‘Encouraging’ or ‘hard to believe’?

### CONTEXT

It will take only a few moments for us to get our bearings.

The whole closing section of Romans 8 (from verse 17 to verse 39), was written to encourage and sustain the saints at Rome in the face of their ‘suffering’.<sup>4</sup> To that end, in verses 18 to 25, the apostle had lifted their eyes to the certainty of a coming ‘glory’, which will be out of all proportion to anything which the powers of this world or the powers of darkness could throw at them ... to a prospect so ‘glorious’, indeed, that the whole of creation can be said to stand on tiptoe, sighing for the time when it will share that glory.<sup>5</sup>

And, should anyone be inclined to object, ‘That’s all very well for the future but how are we expected to cope in the present?’ the apostle introduces two further factors:

(i) First, in verses 26-27, he points to the ministry of the Holy Spirit within, both to help us and to intercede for us.

(ii) Second, in verse 28, he directs his readers, not now to *the glory of God ahead* nor *the Spirit of God within*, but to *the providence of God around*.

Verses 18 to 27 speak of three cases of ‘groaning’: (i) that of the creation;<sup>6</sup> (ii) that of the believer;<sup>7</sup> and (iii) that of the Holy Spirit.<sup>8</sup> And the passage more or less closes with Paul’s expression, ‘we do not know what to pray for as we ought’. And, as I understand it, the opening words of our text stand in deliberate contrast to that acknowledgement; namely, ‘But we know ...’.

I suspect that you find as I do, that, often (in the apostle’s words) ‘we do not know what to pray for’. But, over against this, Paul insists<sup>9</sup> that we do know something of immense (and heart-warming) importance; namely, that ‘all things work together for good to those who love God’.<sup>10</sup>

### LOVERS OF GOD

The apostle characterises believers as ‘those who love God’,<sup>11</sup> a description he had used twice in his earlier letter to the Corinthians.<sup>12</sup>

‘Whereas in chapter 5 the apostle spoke of God’s love for the justified, now he speaks of the love that the justified have for God, a love made possible because God’s love has been poured into their hearts through the Holy Spirit’.<sup>13</sup>

It has been well said that

‘God always makes the first move in the game of love’.<sup>14</sup>

And it strikes me as particularly fitting that, in a letter which has earlier made much of *God’s love for them*,<sup>15</sup> Paul should speak of believers as those who respond to God’s great love for them by themselves *loving Him*.<sup>16</sup>

## THE MEANING OF 'ALL THINGS'

And to those who do love God, the apostle says, He causes 'all things' to co-operate and mutually contribute to their 'good', to their real and eternal blessing and well-being, that is ... something very different, of course, from their present short-term pleasure and comfort.

We can rest assured that God is working on a much larger canvas than we are, as He skilfully weaves 'all things' together, fitting them into His perfect pattern as only He can.

We should note that Paul is certainly not claiming that all things work for our benefit 'by and of themselves', in some wholly mechanical and impersonal fashion. The apostle did not need to be told that it is God who operates (and, as the tense Paul uses conveys, who does so continuously<sup>17</sup>) through 'all things' which befall us, to secure our best and our highest 'good'.

But we need to be clear what Paul has in mind when he uses the word<sup>18</sup> we translate as 'all things'. For it is clear, from the use of the word both elsewhere<sup>19</sup> and in the immediate context here,<sup>20</sup> that it does not necessarily mean 'all things' *absolutely* and *literally*.

It must always be understood in the light of the context in which it is found. And the overall context here is that of providing encouragement to the saints of Rome in the midst of their sufferings and manifold trials.

As I understand it, therefore, the 'all things' of our text refers to all circumstances and events which fall outside of our own control and, especially:

- to all forms of adversity and affliction ...
- to all forms of persecution and suffering ...
- to all forms of anguish and distress ...
- to all forms of trial or painful experience to which Paul's readers were already (or might ever be) exposed.<sup>21</sup>

The apostle is *not* speaking here of things which *we do* and, certainly, not of *bad things* which we do. It has been rightly said that 'the context shows ("all things") to have especial reference to *external circumstances of trial*, and *not at all to men's own sins*'.<sup>22</sup>

'Do not be deceived', Paul makes clear elsewhere, 'God is not mocked, for whatever one sows, that will he also reap'.<sup>23</sup> *Ultimately*, I shall not (and cannot) be better off as a result of my own failings, sins and acts of disobedience.<sup>24</sup> Even if God should deign to use these for the good of others (or even for my own *short-term* good), I can be sure that He never approves of sin and that, in the final analysis, I must always be the loser.

Separately, the truth is that we are far more willing to attribute *the pleasant and enjoyable* experiences of life to the hand of God than we ever are *the unpleasant and disagreeable* experiences. But, in our text, the apostle insists that 'all things' which touch our lives (whether in themselves 'good'<sup>25</sup> or 'bad') come within the control of God and that, as overruled by Him, they mutually contribute to our true 'good'.

## THE MEANING OF 'GOOD'

But this raises, of course, the obvious and all-important question, 'What does Paul mean by "good"?' And, frankly, it is precisely here that many of us often go astray. For, when faced with some great affliction or calamity, we are quick to question whether the seeming iron-clad promise of our verse really does work out in practice.<sup>26</sup>

In terms of the outcome of God's providential dealings in the life of the Christian, I can see three possible dimensions to the word 'good':

1. There is *temporal* and earthly 'good', that which contributes to our present physical enjoyment and pleasure.<sup>27</sup>
2. There is *spiritual* 'good' and wellbeing, that (i) which is related, not to our comfort but to our character, and (ii) which promotes our devotion to God and our drawing near to Him.
3. There is *eternal* 'good', that which reaches out far beyond this present world.

Let us consider each of these in turn.

## 1. TEMPORAL AND PHYSICAL 'GOOD' IN THE PRESENT

The apostle Paul, of all people, would have known that this principle often does work out in a physical way in the present life because, to one as deeply immersed in Old Testament history as he was, there were no shortage of examples, ranging from the classic case of Joseph in the first history book, right through to that of Esther and Mordecai in the last history book in the English Old Testament.<sup>28</sup>

### (i) Case study 1: Joseph

In Joseph's case, we can trace a chain of at least ten links stretching from Genesis 37 to Genesis 41, which brought Joseph all the way from the home of a loving father in Canaan to the very highest position open to him in the whole of the kingdom of Egypt.<sup>29</sup>

And Joseph's chequered experiences were each and all necessary, not only because (as, with the benefit of hindsight, Joseph saw clearly) he was God's appointed means of saving many lives in time of severe famine,<sup>30</sup> but also because he was the Lord's chosen instrument to move Jacob and his family from Canaan to Egypt ... to a vast land where they could increase numerically<sup>31</sup> from a relatively small family numbering a mere seventy-five or so<sup>32</sup> into 'a great nation',<sup>33</sup> numbering in the region of two million.<sup>34</sup>

Make no mistake, if just one link in that chain of providence had failed and the descendants of Jacob had never, therefore, become the 'great nation' (as numerous 'as the dust of the earth'<sup>35</sup>) of which God had spoken, the history of the world (and, indeed, of heaven itself) would be very different!<sup>36</sup>

Without question, under God's hand, 'all things' (ranging from the envy of his brothers, through the lust of Potiphar's wife and many other links, to the forgetfulness of Pharaoh's butler – embracing all of Joseph's trials and sufferings over a thirteen-year period<sup>37</sup>) worked together, not only for Joseph's own 'good', but also for the 'good' of countless others with him, including you and me.

I said earlier that God 'never approves of sin', and I stand by that. We can be sure that, whether in the events of the life of Joseph or anywhere else, God is never the author of sin. Control it, use it, and overrule it for His own wise and gracious purpose and for the long-term good of His people, yes, certainly; but cause and instigate it, an emphatic no!

We do well to heed the wise words of Martyn Lloyd-Jones:

'The great problem is this: if God does govern and control everything, then what is His relationship to sin? All I can do, in answer, is to lay down a number of propositions that are clearly taught in the Scriptures.

The first is that sinful acts are under divine control, and occur only by God's permission and according to His ultimate purpose. If you want proof of that you will find it in the case of Joseph and his brethren. "It was not you that sent me hither", said Joseph, "but God" (Gen. 45. 8). God permitted their sinful act and controlled it. You will find the same teaching about the death of our Lord as it is expounded by Peter on the Day of Pentecost.

The second is that God restrains and controls sin. In Psalm 76. 10 we read, "Surely the wrath of man shall praise thee: the remainder of wrath shalt thou restrain".

The third is that God overrules sin for good. Genesis 50. 20 puts it like this: "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". God overruled the sin, and He did exactly the same in the case of the death of our Lord.

My last proposition is that God never causes sin, nor approves of it; He only permits, directs, restrains, limits and overrules it. People alone are responsible for their sin. The first chapter of James gives that particular teaching clearly'.<sup>38</sup>

Joni Eareckson Tada often quoted the sound saying of her friend Steve Estes, spoken as one day he rested his hand on her wheelchair:

'God permits what He hates to achieve what He loves'.<sup>39</sup>

Well said, Steve.

It is worth noting also that:

'The promise is that God will bring good consequences out of all adverse circumstances, including persecution and death itself ... Paul does not say that God causes all these circumstances, but that He causes good to come out of them'.<sup>40</sup>

There had been a time when Joseph's father would certainly not have signed up to the truth of our text. I have my eye on what Jacob said when told that 'the lord of the country' had detained his son Simeon and had demanded sight of young Benjamin before releasing further corn to him and his family, 'all these things are against me'.<sup>41</sup>

But we know that the time came when Joseph himself would readily have done so. We have only to listen to his words to his brothers:

'It was not you who sent me here, but God ... you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good'.<sup>42</sup>

With those contrasting words of Jacob and Joseph in mind, we can gladly endorse the comment of Warren Wiersbe:

'In Romans 8. 28 God assures us that the difficulties of life are working for us and not against us'.<sup>43</sup>

### (ii) Case study 2: Esther

Jumping from the first history book to the last history book in the English Old Testament, we discover that, if God overruled events in the days of Joseph to enable Jacob's family to develop into the nation of Israel, He overruled events in the days of Esther to save that nation<sup>44</sup> from later being exterminated.

As was true of the life of Joseph, so of the life of Esther, it is possible to trace an all-important 'providence' chain of at least ten links ... in Esther's case a 'providence' chain of events where God worked out of sight and behind the scenes at every stage for the 'good' and the salvation of His people.<sup>45</sup>

If some sceptic insists on believing (for example) that Esther 'just happened' to win the royal beauty contest,<sup>46</sup> that Mordecai 'just happened' to uncover the assassination plot,<sup>47</sup> or that the king 'just happened' to suffer from insomnia the night before Esther denounced Haman,<sup>48</sup> and that he then 'just happened' to choose the right nocturnal reading material,<sup>49</sup> I must leave them to their folly.

For my part, I am content to believe that, although the Lord stayed well and truly out of His people's sight throughout the entire narrative, His people were never out of His!

As I read the Book of Esther, although God's name is not mentioned anywhere there, His fingerprints are all over it! Here is another quotation from Warren Wiersbe, with which I suspect few are likely to disagree:

'The book of Esther is one of the greatest illustrations in the Bible of Romans 8. 28'.<sup>50</sup>

And, between Paul's day and ours, there have been countless other such instances when God providentially brought 'good' out of seeming calamity.

### (iii) Case study 3: Bernard Gilpin

I suspect that few Christians today have even heard of a sixteenth century clergyman by the name of Bernard Gilpin. Well, let me introduce him to you.

Mr Gilpin<sup>51</sup> was a godly Oxford theologian and preacher in the then-emerging Church of England. His life spanned the reigns of no less than five English monarchs<sup>52</sup> and, as a result of his Christian labours in the wilds of the North of England, he was known as the 'Apostle of the North'.<sup>53</sup>

On one occasion, Bernard Gilpin was arrested to be taken to London for trial on account of his uncompromising preaching. At the time, Mary Tudor, the Roman Catholic queen, was on the throne

and, during her reign, over 280 Protestants were executed – the majority by being burned at the stake.<sup>54</sup>

It was the infamous Catholic Bishop Bonner who summoned Mr Gilpin to his trial, and who is on record as having ‘promised that the heretic should be at a stake in a fortnight’. When informed of Bishop Bonner’s assertion, rather than flee into exile, Mr Gilpin ‘ordered his servant<sup>55</sup> to provide a long garment for him, in which he might go decently to the stake’.<sup>56</sup>

His family later reported that, on the way to London, Mr Gilpin had an accident and ‘broke his leg,<sup>57</sup> which put a stop to his journey. The persons, in whose custody he was (it is recorded), took occasion thence, maliciously to retort upon him an observation he would frequently make, that ‘nothing happens to us but what is intended for our good’; asking him, “Whether he thought his broken leg was so intended?”<sup>58</sup>

He replied, in today’s language, ‘I have no doubt of it’. And, sure enough, while he was waiting for the leg to heal, (i) Queen Mary died, (ii) her sister Elizabeth the First, a Protestant, came to the throne and (iii) the persecution of Protestant preachers ceased. And so, when able to travel, rather than going to London to his death, Mr Gilpin returned safely to his home in Houghton-le-Spring near Durham.<sup>59</sup>

I guess that Mr Gilpin could relate personally to the testimony of the psalmist:

‘It is good for me that I have been afflicted’.<sup>60</sup>

## **2 (a). SPIRITUAL ‘GOOD’ IN THE PRESENT – FOR OTHERS**

But the apostle had more recent evidence that, on occasions and as God pleases, ‘all things’ – even persecution and suffering – work for good during the present life.

### **(i) Case study 1: Stephen**

Paul had only to recall how God had brought so much good out of the martyrdom of Stephen, in whose stoning he himself had played no small part.<sup>61</sup> For it was as a direct result of Stephen’s death that ‘there arose ... a great persecution against the church which was in Jerusalem, and they were all (‘all’, that is, except the apostles) scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria’,<sup>62</sup> into which vicious persecution this onetime Saul of Tarsus had thrown himself heart and soul.<sup>63</sup>

And, likely as not, Paul could still remember the frustration and intense annoyance he must have felt when he had discovered, as had the Jewish council, that their combined strategy of harsh and unremitting persecution of the Jerusalem church had badly backfired, both on him and on them. For, as Luke noted later, ‘those who were scattered went everywhere preaching the word’.<sup>64</sup> Now, as a Christian, Paul could hardly miss observing that the self-same opposition and affliction which, at first, must have seemed to be very ‘bad’ for the cause of the gospel had, in fact, turned out to be very ‘good’ for it.

### **(ii) Case study 2: Paul himself**

Although, when dictating<sup>65</sup> the words of our ‘golden’ text for the benefit of the believers at Rome, the apostle had no way of knowing it, he would later discover that his lengthy detention in that very city<sup>66</sup> would, likewise, ‘turn out for the advance of the gospel’.<sup>67</sup> For, when speaking later of his two-year confinement there, with the picture then in proper focus, he was able to trace the hand of God in the events<sup>68</sup> which landed him in chains and which enabled him, thereby, to reach both the Praetorian Guard<sup>69</sup> and the Imperial Civil Service with the message of Christ.<sup>70</sup>

And, as we look back at the apostle’s service for God, we have no problem detecting other instances when God brought ‘good’ out of that which, at the time, seemed ‘bad’ to Paul.

We can consider, for example, Paul’s continually frustrated plans to visit Thessalonica.<sup>71</sup>

The apostle knew that ‘the tempter’ was active at Thessalonica (not least in orchestrating afflictions for the young church there) and that Satan had somehow engineered his prolonged absence from them.<sup>72</sup> Against this background, Paul had not only sent Timothy to strengthen and encourage the believers<sup>73</sup> but also wrote to assure them of his concern for them.

As a result, many generations of Christians then future have derived untold spiritual profit from the Epistle he sent ‘to the church of the Thessalonians’.<sup>74</sup>

Satan certainly overreached himself that time and God overruled for 'good' the devil's evil devices. This was but one instance among many when God has proved that He is well able to turn Satan's *stumbling blocks* into *stepping stones* for the gospel and for the 'good' of His people.

### (iii) Case study 3: John Bunyan

I am confident that, although you may have been strangers to the name of Bernard Gilpin (to which I referred above), you will certainly be familiar with the name of a Christian preacher who lived about one hundred years later. I speak of the famed 'Tinker of Bedford',<sup>75</sup> namely, John Bunyan.<sup>76</sup>

And, with the words of our text in mind, I might well ask, 'Would this Baptist Puritan ever have written his classic, "The Pilgrim's Progress from This World to That Which is to Come", had he not been imprisoned in Bedford county jail for lengthy periods of time?'<sup>77</sup> There are no prizes for guessing the answer!

### (iv) Case study 4: 'The Ecuador martyrs'

Coming forward almost three centuries,<sup>78</sup> and still with the words of our text in mind, let me remind you of a seemingly tragic event which took place a little over 65 years ago.

You may not be able to quote the names of all five young men<sup>79</sup> who gave their lives on 8 January 1956, when Waorani warriors speared them on so-called 'Palm Beach' in the rainforest of Ecuador<sup>80</sup> but I am confident that you will, at least, recognise the name of Jim Elliott.

I cannot believe that their widows – or the Christian world in general – regarded the deaths of the five young men as a particularly 'good' thing *at the time*.

And yet we *now* know that their sacrifice has had an enormous impact for 'good' on an untold number of believers subsequently.

On the fiftieth anniversary of the death of the five young men, the brother of one of the five, Ken Fleming,<sup>81</sup> himself a missionary,<sup>82</sup> reported:

'Their sacrifice has had a life-changing effect on tens of thousands, and has had some effect on millions of others.

'... During the World Conference on Evangelism at Amsterdam in 2000, Steve Saint [the son of Nate Saint, another of the five] and his father's (now converted) killer, Mincaye, were among the ... delegates from all over the world. While there, Steve and Mincaye had opportunity to ask the crowd if any of them had made life-changing decisions as a result of the sacrifice made ... in Ecuador in 1956.

'They could hardly believe it when at least 3,000 stood to their feet! And these were "life-changing" decisions remember'.<sup>83</sup>

Do you recall the apostle's words (to which I referred a little earlier) that 'what has happened to me has turned out ... *for the advance the gospel*'?<sup>84</sup> Just two days before the death of the Ecuador martyrs, they had entertained three Waorani at their campsite, following which one of the five, Pete Fleming, wrote in his journal:

'This is a great day for the advance of the gospel ...'.<sup>85</sup>

Little did Pete know!<sup>86</sup>

Another of the so-called 'Five Ecuador Martyrs' was Nate Saint, the team's 'Jungle Pilot'.<sup>87</sup>

Let me quote you the testimony of Nate Saint's son, Steve, who was just five years old when his father was martyred. Steve wrote in 2005:

'I have personally paid a high price for what happened on Palm Beach. But I have also had a front-row seat as the rest of the story has been unfolding for half a century. I have seen first-hand that much good has come from it.

'I believe only God could have fashioned such an incredible story from such a tragic event. I could not begin to record the thousands of people who have told me that God used what happened on Palm Beach to change the course of their lives for good.

‘... If I could go back now and rewrite the script, I would not change a single scene. I have come to understand that life is too complex and much too short to let amateurs direct the story. I would rather let the Master Storyteller do the writing’.<sup>88</sup>

Yes, many have been the times when God’s people (both within and outside the pages of Scripture) have been able to trace a little of how the Lord has brought ‘good’ out of seeming calamity, often for the benefit of others.

## **2 (b). SPIRITUAL ‘GOOD’ IN THE PRESENT – FOR ONESELF**

But, although we may choose to apply the guarantee given in Romans 8 verse 28 in this more general way, properly speaking our text homes in on the assurance which God gives that ‘all things (all circumstances and experiences) work together for good’, specifically and personally, for the benefit of *the individual*, himself or herself.

And the apostle Paul certainly found this to be true in his own experience.

It is generally accepted that the Epistle to the Romans was written shortly after Paul’s second Epistle to the Corinthians, and several years after his Epistle to the Galatians.<sup>89</sup> Interestingly, when writing those two other Epistles, Paul had occasion to recall experiences of many years before, experiences which were anything but pleasant at the time but in which, as he looked back on them, he could clearly trace God’s hand at work.<sup>90</sup>

### **(i) Case study 1: a visit cut short**

In his letter to the Galatians, the apostle had occasion to refer to a visit which he had paid to Jerusalem about three years after his conversion. His purpose in going was to see the apostles there and Peter in particular.<sup>91</sup> Initially, he encountered a little difficulty when he attempted to join himself to the disciples,<sup>92</sup> for he had spent the three years since his conversion in Damascus and Arabia,<sup>93</sup> and the saints at Jerusalem still knew of him only as a persecutor and an adversary. They were therefore ‘all afraid of him’.<sup>94</sup> But, following the commendation of Barnabas, the church received Paul.<sup>95</sup>

The apostle’s time at Jerusalem was occupied in evangelism as well as in conference with Peter,<sup>96</sup> but his dispute with the Hellenists (Greek-speaking Jews) soon landed him in hot water.<sup>97</sup> For his own safety<sup>98</sup> the brethren ‘sent him off to Tarsus’ via Caesarea.<sup>99</sup>

Personally, I suspect that there may have been a measure of reluctance on Paul’s part to leave Jerusalem. Certainly, it must have been a great disappointment to the apostle to curtail his activities there and to terminate his conference with Peter after only two weeks.

But, when Paul wrote Galatians, he was looking back over perhaps fifteen years<sup>100</sup> since his visit to Jerusalem. His present problem was to establish beyond dispute that his apostleship was wholly independent of Jerusalem. And, in demonstrating that he was an apostle ‘not from men nor through man, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father’,<sup>101</sup> he was able to record, not only

(i) that the Jerusalem apostles recognized his independent apostleship<sup>102</sup> and

(ii) that, so far was he from being an appointee of Peter, that on one occasion he had actually rebuked Peter publicly<sup>103</sup>

but also

(iii) that for the first seventeen years<sup>104</sup> of his ministry he had visited Jerusalem only once and then for no more than fifteen days.<sup>105</sup>

The fact that the Lord had permitted Paul to see Peter<sup>106</sup> for little more than two weeks formed an invaluable part of Paul’s argument. And he could now see that what had been (on account of the fierce opposition of the Hellenists) a great disappointment to him at the time, had indeed worked for his ‘good’.

### **(ii) Case study 2: a ‘thorn’ come to stay**

In his second letter to the Corinthians, Paul had occasion to refer to his ‘thorn in the flesh’ and to the reason for it.<sup>107</sup> In chapter 12 of his letter, the apostle felt compelled to raise the subject of visions and revelations,<sup>108</sup> for it seems that one of the serious charges levelled against Paul at Corinth was that he did not experience ecstasies or visions. The apostle knew that the Corinthians, who had rather lost their heads over such things, would have regarded this as a serious shortcoming.

He felt constrained, therefore, to refer to a supernatural occurrence which he had experienced over fourteen years before, when he was 'caught up' into Paradise.<sup>109</sup> It was following this experience that he had been afflicted with a 'thorn in the flesh', which he had reason to attribute to the malicious working of Satan.<sup>110</sup> Clearly, this 'thorn' was something physical, painful, and humiliating, and, above all else, was regarded by Paul as impeding his service for the Lord. He had, therefore, prayed about it three times, specifically asking the Lord to remove it.<sup>111</sup>

In response, the Lord had granted Paul two things.

First, He gave him His own 'sufficient' *grace*.<sup>112</sup> Yes, the Lord dealt with the problem ... but *not* in the way Paul had hoped. The apostle had asked, in effect, that the Lord would lift the heavy burden from his back; instead of which, the Lord undertook to strengthen the back which bore the burden.

And second, He gave Paul an *explanation*.<sup>113</sup> The Lord made known to Paul *why* He refused to remove the 'thorn'.

Paul's *underlying* concern had been with his future usefulness for the Lord, and the Lord taught him that his 'thorn', a source of his 'weakness', was altogether essential if he was ever to remain 'a vessel ... useful' to His heavenly Master.<sup>114</sup>

For there was a very real danger that, on account of the extraordinary revelations he had received, the apostle (a converted Pharisee,<sup>115</sup> remember) would become 'lifted up' as high in conceit and pride as ever he had been 'lifted up' in his vision!

Truly, 'the thorn in the flesh was to puncture the puffing up of pride'.<sup>116</sup> Paul's 'thorn' would therefore keep him humble and, thereby, 'serviceable to the Master'.<sup>117</sup>

And, as Paul had looked back<sup>118</sup> in 2 Corinthians 12 over fourteen years of later apostolic ministry, he realised that the Lord's way had been best, and that, throughout that period, He had been working 'all things' together for his 'good'.<sup>119</sup>

### 3. ETERNAL 'GOOD' IN THE FUTURE

But, having said all this (and you will accept, I hope, that what I have said is soundly based, either in Scripture or in history), we have to recognise that, *first and foremost*, our verse is *not* speaking about any 'good' *in this present life*.

That is, our verse is *not* speaking about any present 'good' which, in His kind providence, God may choose to bring out of seemingly adverse circumstances or experiences, whether that 'good' be physical or spiritual.

'Romans 8. 28 does not mean, as is commonly thought, that "everything will turn out okay in this life", rather that everything will work out for our ultimate good. These words have our *eternal* rather than our temporal good in mind'.<sup>120</sup>

It is clear from the context that what Paul has principally in mind is our *ultimate* and *eternal* good in a far grander world than this; namely, the achieving of God's *long-term* purpose for us, that we should 'be conformed to the image of His Son',<sup>121</sup> and that we should be 'glorified'.<sup>122</sup>

In other words, the 'good' which God has in view when He orchestrates all events in our lives is *not* that of our safety, our comfort, our wealth or our health in the here and now. It is our conformity to a glorified Christ, which will be fully realised only in heaven.

I hardly need to tell you that 'all things' (all circumstances and affairs in the lives of God's people) certainly do *not* always 'work together for good' *in this world*. Nor has this ever been true.

#### (i) God's people through the ages

The writer to the Hebrews knew this well. He made the point clearly when listing out in his chapter 11 some of the past exploits and achievements of men and women of faith.

Having spoken of some of the wonderful *triumphs* of faith (of those who 'through faith subdued kingdoms ... stopped the mouths of lions, quenched the violence of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, out of weakness were made strong' ... of women who 'received back their dead by resurrection'<sup>123</sup>), he then added, '**But others** were tortured, not accepting deliverance, that they might obtain a better resurrection, and others underwent trial of mockings and scourgings, yes, and of



chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were sawn in two, were tempted, were slain with the sword' and so on.<sup>124</sup>

It would be hard to miss that, whereas, 'through faith', **some** of God's people '*escaped* the edge of the sword', **others** (equally 'through faith') '*were slain* with the sword'. (In New Testament days, we naturally think of Acts 12 and of the dramatically different outcomes of execution and deliverance for the apostles James<sup>125</sup> and Peter<sup>126</sup> respectively.)

But neither can we miss the writer's reference to another world:

'... that they might obtain a better resurrection'<sup>127</sup>

'Better', that is, than the cases of resurrection in the days of Elijah and Elisha, to which the writer had just referred.<sup>128</sup> For the return to life of the two sons in view in the first part of Heb. 11. 35 was only temporary; they were still mortal and would therefore die again in due course. They were, if you like, only out on parole, required to report back to death again in due course. But the 'better resurrection' for which the tortured and suffering saints looked will be no short-term release from the grip of death; because they (as we, if we die) will be raised 'incorruptible', never to die again.<sup>129</sup>

Truly then, as the apostle expressed it in the immediate context,

'The sufferings of this present time are *not worth comparing* with the glory that is to be revealed to us'.<sup>130</sup>

'What Paul tells the Romans is not that we *live in* the best possible world, but we *are being prepared for* the best possible world',<sup>131</sup> that 'our setbacks and sufferings become ***stepping-stones to glory***'.<sup>132</sup>

William Cowper captured the sense of this in the third stanza of his hymn/poem, 'God moves in a mysterious way':

'The bud may have a bitter taste,  
But sweet will be the flow'r'.

## (ii) God's people today

But, alas for me, I am spiritually short-sighted, and need to remind myself constantly that our text does not commit God to make me happy, contented and successful down here;<sup>133</sup> it commits Him rather to pattern me fully after the image of His Son.

What a thought! According to the *opening* section of the chapter, God's 'own Son' was sent '***in the likeness*** of sinful flesh',<sup>134</sup> and this that, *according* to the closing section of the chapter, we sinners might one day be changed into ***His likeness***,<sup>135</sup> that one day we shall bear the image of Him who is heavenly.<sup>136</sup>

Whenever we face adversity and trial, we rest on God's promise that He will work it out 'for good' *in the end*. And if we find that the adversity and trial hasn't worked out 'for good', we can only conclude that this is *not yet the end*.

And we are in no position to judge the *goodness* of God's working until His programme is finished.

Meantime, although we cannot comprehend the mystery of His dealings with us, we can rest in the assurance which the Lord Jesus gave to Simon Peter when preparing to wash his feet in the so-called 'Upper Room':

'You do not know *now* what I am doing, but you will understand *afterward*'.<sup>137</sup>

And those words, '*you will understand afterward*' remind me of something I read some time ago about the late Dr E. C. Caldwell, then Professor of New Testament at a theological seminary in the United States.<sup>138</sup>

Dr Caldwell 'had just completed his lecture for the day and informed his students of their assignment. "Tomorrow", he concluded, "I will be teaching on the eighth chapter of Romans. So tonight, as you study this chapter, I want you to pay close attention to verse 28—"all things work together for good to them that love God". ... He paused and ... added, "One final word before I dismiss you—whatever happens in all the years to come, remember: Romans 8. 28 will always hold true".

'Later that day, Dr Caldwell and his wife were driving their car over a railroad crossing, oblivious to the fact that a freight train was approaching the crossing. The train ploughed into the car, killing Mrs. Caldwell instantly. Severely injured, Dr Caldwell was rushed by ambulance to the hospital. He survived but his injuries left him permanently handicapped.

'Months later he returned to the classroom. Gripping his cane, he stood before the class. Not a sound could be heard. They remembered his last words about Romans 8. 28. Looking into the faces of his students, he said, "Rom 8. 28 still holds true. *One day we shall see God's good, even in this*".<sup>139</sup>

Yes, Dr Caldwell, '*one day*' – and that will be the *ultimate* happy ending, when our God 'will wipe away every tear'.<sup>140</sup>

And, with those words in mind, I cannot but think of the third verse of George Matheson's masterly hymn, 'O love that wilt not let me go':

O Joy that seekest me through pain,  
I cannot close my heart to thee;  
*I trace the rainbow through the rain,*  
And feel the promise is not vain,  
That *morn shall tearless be*.<sup>141</sup>

## CONCLUSION

We can barely imagine how much this text would have meant to the believers in Rome<sup>142</sup> when, some seven years later,<sup>143</sup> they faced the full brunt of Nero's persecution.<sup>144</sup>

And what a joy it is for *us* to know:

- that our highest 'good' is God's sieve which He uses when permitting the 'all things' to enter our lives,
- that nothing, but nothing, happens to us outside of His control,
- that He is never taken by surprise,
- that He never makes mistakes, and
- that, whatever appearances may suggest to the contrary, God's kind providence will always say to us, in the words of the prophet Balaam, 'Behold, I have received a command to bless; He has blessed, and I cannot reverse it'.<sup>145</sup>

In summary, God can (and does) sometimes work seemingly adverse circumstances to promote the 'good' of His people in the present world, although He has given us no promise or guarantee that He will do this.

But we do have His assurance that *everything* which He permits in our lives will work for our 'good' in another (and a better) world. Meanwhile, He asks us to trust Him.

Yes indeed,

**'we know that all things work together for good to those who love God'.**

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Following more closely the order of the Greek words, the verse would be translated more accurately: 'But we know that to those who love God all things work together for good, to those who are called according to His purpose'. For the various possible renderings of the verse, see (i) Thomas R. Schreiner, *Romans (Baker Exegetical Commentary)*, on Rom. 8. 28, (ii) Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *Romans (The Anchor Bible)*, page 522-524, and (iii) C. E. B. Cranfield, 'Romans 8. 28', *Scottish Journal of Theology*, Volume 19, Issue 2, June 1966, pages 206-213..

<sup>2</sup> Michael F. Bird, *Romans: The Story of God Bible Commentary*, page 281.

<sup>3</sup> 'Faced with the sufferings and catastrophic experiences of life, many believers and even Christian leaders have found it difficult to accept this categorical assertion. During World War II a prominent preacher designated Romans 8. 28 as "*the hardest verse in the Bible to believe*", D. Edmond Hiebert, *Romans 8. 28-29*, *Bibliotheca Sacra*—V148 #590—Apr 91—171.

<sup>4</sup> Rom. 8. 17-18, 35-36; cf. Rom. 5. 3.

<sup>5</sup> Rom. 8. 19 – 'to watch eagerly with outstretched head' (*ἀποκαταδοκία*).

<sup>6</sup> Rom. 8. 22.

<sup>7</sup> Rom. 8. 23.

<sup>8</sup> Rom. 8. 26.

<sup>9</sup> Using the same word translated 'know' (*οἶδαμεν*).

<sup>10</sup> Verse 22 similarly began 'we know' (*οἶδαμεν*). Paul speaks, then, of two subjects of Christian knowledge; (i) creation's 'birth-pang' groaning and (ii) God's providential care.

<sup>11</sup> 'This (Rom. 8. 28) is the only place in the Epistle where our love to God is mentioned', W. E. Vine, *Romans*, page 128.

<sup>12</sup> 1 Cor. 2. 9; 8. 3; cf. James 1. 12; 2. 5.

<sup>13</sup> Frank J. Matera, *Romans (Paideia Commentary)*, page 204 - referencing Rom. 5. 5, 8.

<sup>14</sup> G. S. Sloyan, *Walking in the Truth: Perseverers and Deserters (NTC)*, page 49.

<sup>15</sup> Rom. 5. 5, 8.

<sup>16</sup> 'The love to God, which is commanded in Scripture, is nothing less than the response of a man in the totality of his being to the prior love of God', C. E. B. Cranfield, *op. cit.*, page 205.

<sup>17</sup> The present tense of the verb (*συνεργει*) emphasizes that this is the continuing activity of God. Pedantically, God works all things 'continuously', rather than 'continually'. 'Continuous' means without interruption in an unbroken stream of time or space; for example, 'The continuous dripping of the tap drove me crazy'. 'Continual ... typically means "happening frequently, with intervals between", as in "the bus service has been disrupted by continual breakdowns". See <http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/words/continual-or-continuous>.

<sup>18</sup> The Greek word, *πᾶς*.

<sup>19</sup> 1 Cor. 2. 15; 6. 12; 10. 23; Phil. 4. 13.

<sup>20</sup> Rom. 8. 32.

<sup>21</sup> This is the common view of Bible expositors. For example:

- (i) 'The context requires this especial reference to sufferings', E. H. Gifford, *The Epistle of St. Paul to the Romans*, page 159.
- (ii) 'When he says "all things", he means even things that seem to be painful. For even if affliction, poverty, imprisonment, hunger, death, or any other thing should come upon us, God is able to change all these things into the opposite. For this is an instance of His unspeakable power, to make things seemingly painful light to us, and turn them into that which is helpful to us', John Chrysostom, *Homilies on the Epistle to the Romans*, Homily XV on Rom. 8. 28.
- (iii) 'The term "all things", includes all that comes on us, especially everything painful in consequence of the miseries of the present time and of the sins of our neighbours. But it would be wrong to embrace under it what we may do ourselves in opposition to God's will, since that would contradict the idea', F. Godet, *Commentary on St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans*, page 322.
- (iv) "'All things", as is usually the case with such general expressions, is to be limited to the things spoken of in the context, i.e., the sufferings of the present time. See 1 Cor. 2. 15, where the spiritual man is said to understand "all things"; Col. 1. 20, where Christ is said to reconcile "all things" unto God', Charles Hodge, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, page 441.
- (v) 'In the light of the context (vv. 18–27) the primary reference of πάντα (all things) is to every kind of painful experience in Christian lives, all those that press groans from our lips and make us groan inwardly in unuttered and unutterable distress. Some of the things that Paul has in mind he states in vv. 38, 39', R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans*, page 551.
- (vi) "How much is included in "all things"? This must be determined by the context, which specifically deals with the ills and adversities of our present earthly life, "our present sufferings" (v. 18; see vv. 33-39). This includes trials and miseries suffered as the consequence of others' sins', J. Cottrell, *The College Press NIV commentary*, on Rom. 8. 28.

<sup>22</sup> J. Barmby, *Romans (The Pulpit Commentary)*, on Rom. 8. 29-30.

<sup>23</sup> Gal. 6. 6-7.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. 2 Cor. 5. 10.

<sup>25</sup> The verse does not say that 'all things are good' but that 'all things work together for good', a very different thing.

<sup>26</sup> See Note 3 above.

<sup>27</sup> 'There are many who say, "Who will show us some good?"' Psa. 4. 6.

<sup>28</sup> Compare, for example, (i) the case of Naomi, Ruth 1. 20-21 with 4. 14-17; (ii) the case of Job, Job 3. 1 with 42. 12; and (iii) the case of Manasseh, whose bronze chains and captivity worked for his good, 2 Chron. 33. 11-16.

<sup>29</sup> That 'chain of ten links' comprises:

- (i) The envy of Joseph's brothers, Gen. 37. 1-11
- (ii) The anxiety of Joseph's father, Gen. 37. 12-14
- (iii) The friendly inquiry of a certain man of Shechem, Gen. 37. 15-17
- (iv) The timely intervention of Reuben and Judah, Gen. 37. 18-24; 26-27
- (v) The journeying of certain Arabian traders, Gen. 37. 25, 28
- (vi) The domestic needs of Potiphar's household, Gen. 37. 36; 39. 1-6
- (vii) The wickedness of Potiphar's wife, Gen. 39. 7-18
- (viii) The injustice of Potiphar's decision, Gen. 39. 19-23
- (ix) The falling from favour of Pharaoh's chief butler and chief baker, Gen. 40. 1-4 – and
- (x) The memory of the chief butler, Gen. 40. 20-23; 41. 9-13.

<sup>30</sup> Gen. 45. 5-9; 'God meant it for good', Gen. 50. 20.

<sup>31</sup> Which they could not have done had they remained in the land of Canaan.

<sup>32</sup> Acts 7. 14.

<sup>33</sup> Gen. 46. 3; cf. Gen. 12. 1-2.

<sup>34</sup> Exod. 12. 37; Num. 1. 46.

<sup>35</sup> Gen. 28. 14.

<sup>36</sup> Rom. 9. 5.

<sup>37</sup> Gen. 37. 2; 41. 46.

- <sup>38</sup> Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *'God the Father, God the Son'*, a series of sermons preached at Westminster Chapel, London, from 1952 to 1955 and first published in 1996.
- <sup>39</sup> Joni E. Tada and Steve Estes, *'When God Weeps'*, page 84.
- <sup>40</sup> J. Cottrell, *op. cit.*, on Rom. 8. 28. Sometimes, God brings 'good' out of circumstances 'caused' by the devil; see, for example, 'Case study 2: a 'thorn' come to stay' on page 7.
- <sup>41</sup> Gen. 42. 36.
- <sup>42</sup> Gen. 45. 8; 50. 20.
- <sup>43</sup> Warren Wiersbe, *'Be Right: Romans'*, page 97 (emphasis original).
- <sup>44</sup> This was the nation He once addressed as, 'my nation', Isa. 51. 4.
- <sup>45</sup> God's providence is woven into the very fabric of the story of Esther. The ten links in the chain are as follows:
- (i) Queen Vashti refuses to attend the king's feast.
  - (ii) The king accepts the advice of his officials both to remove and to replace Vashti.
  - (iii) Esther is chosen as the new queen.
  - (iv) Mordecai hears of, and reports, a plot against the king's life.
  - (v) The king fails to reward Mordecai at the time.
  - (vi) The king's decree authorising the execution of all the Jews specifies a date 11 months later, thereby giving time for the subsequent stages of God's rescue programme.)
  - (vii) Esther is twice extended the golden sceptre which spared her life.
  - (viii) The king agrees to attend two banquets.
  - (ix) During a sleepless night, the king 'just happens' to have read to him details of Mordecai's part in frustrating the previous assassination attempt and exalts Mordecai to be his First Minister.
  - (x) When the day comes for the king's decrees to be put into operation, Mordecai's recent appointment swings the balance in favour of the Jews, who prevail over their enemies.
- <sup>46</sup> Esther 2. 17.
- <sup>47</sup> Esther 2. 21-22.
- <sup>48</sup> Esther 6. 1.
- <sup>49</sup> Esther 6. 2-3.
- <sup>50</sup> Warren Wiersbe, *'Be Committed: Doing God's Will Whatever the Cost'*, page 77.
- <sup>51</sup> Lived 1517-1583.
- <sup>52</sup> Henry VIII, Edward VI, Lady Jane Grey, Mary and Elizabeth I.
- <sup>53</sup> See [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bernard\\_Gilpin](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bernard_Gilpin)
- <sup>54</sup> See [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mary\\_I\\_of\\_England#Religious\\_policy](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mary_I_of_England#Religious_policy)
- <sup>55</sup> His steward William Airey.
- <sup>56</sup> William Gilpin, *'The Life of Bernard Gilpin'*, published 1830, page 125.
- <sup>57</sup> Apparently, he fell from his horse; see <http://www.stmichaels-hls.org.uk/visit-us/bernard-gilpin>.
- <sup>58</sup> William Gilpin, *ibid.*, page 126.
- <sup>59</sup> See *'Bernard Gilpin'*, Encyclopaedia Britannica, 11<sup>th</sup> edition, volume XII, page 25, By way of comparison, I was interested to read in the rabbinic teachings of the Jews that (and I quote), 'Rabbi Akiba was once going along the road and he came to a certain town and looked for lodgings but was everywhere refused. He said 'Whatever the All-Merciful does is for good', and he went and spent the night in the open field ... The same night some brigands came and carried off the inhabitants of the town'; source: *'Babylonian Talmud: Tractate Berakoth'*, Folio 60b. (Rabbi Akiba ben Joseph lived 40-137 AD, somewhat later than the apostle Paul.)
- <sup>60</sup> Psa. 119. 71.
- <sup>61</sup> Acts 7. 58; 8. 1a.

<sup>62</sup> Acts 8. 1b.

<sup>63</sup> Acts 8. 3.

<sup>64</sup> Acts 8. 4.

<sup>65</sup> Rom. 16. 22.

<sup>66</sup> Acts 28. 16, 30.

<sup>67</sup> Phil. 1. 12-18. 'After dictating his letter to Rome ... Paul was to pass through many more experiences which would confirm the truth of his assertion that "all things work together for good to them that love God" (compare, for example, Acts 21. 26-33 with Phil. 1. 12-18)', quoted from the article, '*All Things Work Together for Good*', Precious Seed, 1980, Volume 31 Issue 2.

<sup>68</sup> Acts 21. 26-33 etc.

<sup>69</sup> Phil. 1. 13.

<sup>70</sup> Phil. 4. 22. See William Barclay, '*The Letters to the Philippians, Colossians, and Thessalonians*', page 87, Ben Witherington III, '*Philippians*', pages 283-284, and F. F. Bruce, '*Philippians (Good News Commentary)*', pages 133-134.

<sup>71</sup> 1 Thess. 2. 17-18.

<sup>72</sup> 1 Thess. 3. 2-5.

<sup>73</sup> 1 Thess. 3. 2.

<sup>74</sup> 1 Thess. 1. 1.

<sup>75</sup> This is the title of John Bunyan's biography by William S. Deal (1977). Bunyan actually worked as a tinker in the village of Elstow, a little south east of Bedford.

<sup>76</sup> 28 November 1628 – 31 August 1688.

<sup>77</sup> Bunyan wrote '*The Pilgrim's Progress*' in two parts, the first of which was published in London in 1678 and the second in 1684. He conceived the work during his first period of imprisonment, and probably finished it during the second.

'Early Bunyan scholars like John Brown believed *The Pilgrim's Progress* was begun in Bunyan's second, shorter, imprisonment for six months in 1675, but more recent scholars like Roger Sharrock believe that it was begun during Bunyan's initial, more lengthy imprisonment from 1660–1672 right after he had written his spiritual autobiography, "Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners", [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Pilgrim's\\_Progress](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Pilgrim's_Progress). See also [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John\\_Bunyan](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Bunyan).

<sup>78</sup> From circa 1670 to 1956.

<sup>79</sup> Jim Elliott, Nate Saint, Peter Fleming, Ed McCully, and Roger Youderian.

<sup>80</sup> See the 20-page article in LIFE magazine on 30 January 1956, accessed at ... [http://books.google.co.uk/books?id=gT8EAAAAMBAJ&pg=PA10&source=gbs\\_toc\\_r&redir\\_esc=y#v=twopage&q&f=true](http://books.google.co.uk/books?id=gT8EAAAAMBAJ&pg=PA10&source=gbs_toc_r&redir_esc=y#v=twopage&q&f=true).

<sup>81</sup> See <http://provocationsandpaintings.blogspot.co.uk/2006/01/other-end-of-spear.html>

<sup>82</sup> Among the Zulu people.

<sup>83</sup> Ken Fleming, '*What is the Point of this Waste?*' Echoes of Service magazine, June 2006, pages 253, 255.

<sup>84</sup> Phil. 1. 12.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, page 247.

<sup>86</sup> 'Older readers of these pages will remember the five Wheaton College graduates in the 1950s who lost their lives in an attempt to bring the gospel to the Auca Indians. Among the excellent unforeseen results was the very high number of Wheaton graduates who year after year for the next decade or two offered themselves for missionary service. Because of the death of the "Auca five", many were "encouraged to speak the word of God more courageously and fearlessly"', D. A. Carson. '*Basics for Believers: An Exposition of Philippians*', pages 22-28.

- <sup>87</sup> The title of Nate Saint's biography, written by Russell Hitt and published in 1997.
- <sup>88</sup> Steve Saint, *'The End of the Spear'*, pages 59-60.
- <sup>89</sup> Romans was probably written in AD 57, 2 Corinthians in AD 56, and Galatians sometime around AD 50.
- <sup>90</sup> A short article entitled, *'All things Work Together for Good'*, was published in the Precious Seed magazine in 1980. That article focused largely on Paul's recollection of the same two experiences which occupy the following section of this document. The article can be accessed at [https://preciousseed.org/article\\_detail.cfm?articleID=1002](https://preciousseed.org/article_detail.cfm?articleID=1002). The intervening 40-year period has not caused me to change my assessment of the apostle's experiences!
- <sup>91</sup> Gal. 1. 18.
- <sup>92</sup> Acts 9. 26.
- <sup>93</sup> Acts 9. 20-25; Gal. 1. 17.
- <sup>94</sup> Acts 9. 26.
- <sup>95</sup> Acts 9. 27-28.
- <sup>96</sup> And James, Gal. 1. 19.
- <sup>97</sup> Acts 9. 29.
- <sup>98</sup> Cf. Acts 9. 25 and 17. 14.
- <sup>99</sup> Acts 9. 30.
- <sup>100</sup> Circa AD 35 to circa AD 50.
- <sup>101</sup> Gal. 1. 1.
- <sup>102</sup> Gal. 2. 1-10.
- <sup>103</sup> Gal. 2. 11-21.
- <sup>104</sup> Gal. 1. 18; 2. 1.
- <sup>105</sup> Gal. 1. 18.
- <sup>106</sup> And James, Gal. 1. 19.
- <sup>107</sup> 2 Cor. 12. 7-10.
- <sup>108</sup> 2 Cor. 12. 1-6.
- <sup>109</sup> 2 Cor. 12. 4.
- <sup>110</sup> 2 Cor. 12. 7.
- <sup>111</sup> 2 Cor. 12. 8. The apostle was able to make his repeated request to One who knew all about (i) Satanic opposition (Luke 22. 53), (ii) being 'buffeted' (*'κολαφίζω'*, Mark 14. 65; 2 Cor. 12. 7) and (iii) asking three times for something to be removed from Him (Matt. 26. 44)!
- <sup>112</sup> 2 Cor. 12. 9.
- <sup>113</sup> Note the word 'for' in 2 Cor. 12. 9.
- <sup>114</sup> Cf. 2 Tim. 2. 21.
- <sup>115</sup> Acts 23. 6; 26. 5; Phil. 3. 5.
- <sup>116</sup> Thomas Watson, *'A Divine Cordial'*, page 19.
- <sup>117</sup> 2 Tim. 2. 21 (JND).

<sup>118</sup> 'The providence of God is like Hebrew words—it can be read only backwards', John Flavel, *'Navigation Spiritualized'*, The Works of John Flavel, Vol. 5, page 284. In the present, we can no more read God's purposes for our individual lives than we can understand Hebrew text if we try to read it from left to right.

<sup>119</sup> Again, as in 1 Thessalonians 2-3, this was a case where Satan had overreached himself.

<sup>120</sup> R. Kent Hughes, *'Romans: Righteousness from Heaven (Preaching the Word Series)'*, page 167.

<sup>121</sup> Rom. 8. 29.

<sup>122</sup> Rom. 8. 30.

<sup>123</sup> Heb. 11. 33-35a.

<sup>124</sup> Heb. 11. 35b-38.

<sup>125</sup> Acts 12. 2.

<sup>126</sup> Acts 12. 7-10.

<sup>127</sup> Heb. 11. 35b.

<sup>128</sup> Heb. 11. 35a.

<sup>129</sup> 1 Cor. 15. 52.

<sup>130</sup> Rom. 8. 18.

<sup>131</sup> Michael F. Bird, *op. cit.*, page 282.

<sup>132</sup> John Schultz, *'Paul's Epistle to the Romans'*, page 74 (accessed at ... [http://www.bible-commentaries.com/source/johnschultz/BC\\_Romans.pdf](http://www.bible-commentaries.com/source/johnschultz/BC_Romans.pdf)).

<sup>133</sup> His aim for them now is not to make them happy, materially prosperous or famous but to make them Christ-like.

<sup>134</sup> Rom. 8. 3.

<sup>135</sup> 1 John 3. 2; cf. Phil. 3. 21.

<sup>136</sup> 1 Cor. 15. 49.

<sup>137</sup> John 13. 7.

<sup>138</sup> Union Theological Seminary, now (since 2010) Union Presbyterian Seminary.

<sup>139</sup> Ron Lee Davis, *'Becoming A Whole Person In A Broken World'*, pages.118-119.

<sup>140</sup> Rev. 21. 4.

<sup>141</sup> In one of his 'meditations', Mr Matheson wrote, 'My God, I have never thanked Thee for my thorn. **I have thanked Thee a thousand times for my roses, but not once for my thorn.** I have been looking forward to a world where I shall get compensation for my cross, but I have never thought of my cross as itself a present glory. Thou, Divine Love, whose human path has been perfected through sufferings, teach me the glory of my cross, teach me the value of my thorn. Show me that I have climbed to Thee by the path of pain. **Show me that my tears have made my rainbow.** Reveal to me that my strength was the product of that hour when I wrestled until the breaking of the day. Then shall I know that my thorn was blessed by Thee, then shall I know that my cross was a gift from Thee, and I shall raise a monument to the hour of my sorrows, and the words which I shall write upon it will be these: "It was good for me to have been afflicted" (Psalm 119. 71)', George Matheson, *'Moments on the Mount'*, meditation XXVI, pages 60-62.

<sup>142</sup> Rom. 1. 1, 7.

<sup>143</sup> In AD 64.

<sup>144</sup> Publius Cornelius Tacitus, *'The Annals'*, Book XV, 44; cf. Eusebius, *'Ecclesiastical History'* Book II. 25. 5.

<sup>145</sup> Num. 23. 20.