

All Things Working Together for Good

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- Psalter 30: 1-3
- Scripture: Romans 8:28-39
- Psalter 144: 1-6
- Psalter 386: 5,7
- Psalter 201: 1,5,6

Dear congregation, it is our heartfelt prayer that the Lord God may dwell among us as we gather for worship on yet another Sabbath that He has mercifully granted to us. Today we want to focus on a theme that is full of comfort for God's dear people — namely, how God works even some of the most difficult things in the lives of His own for their real good. Our text you can find in Romans 8:28, "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. "

Our major theme will be: "All Things Working Together for Good for God's People." With God's help, we will limit ourselves to considering the following points:

1. How God works affliction together for the welfare of His people
2. How God works divine desertion together for the welfare of His people
3. How God causes even sin to serve the welfare of His people

1. How God works affliction together for the welfare of His people

The life of a true Christian resembles the internals of a watch. Open a watch, and what do you see? You see that certain wheels which turn in a counterclockwise direction are attached to other wheels that are working in a clockwise direction. Your first thought may be that the watchmaker is either foolish or confused. But he is neither.

Rather, he has so arranged the internals of this watch and put in a mainspring to govern all its wheels, that when wound, though one wheel turns clockwise and another counterclockwise, all work together to move the hands around the face of

the watch at precisely the right speed. Many wheels appear to counteract each other, but they all work together for the identical purpose of revealing accurate time.

A watch, dear congregation, is symbolic of the life of God's people. Some wheels in their life run clockwise, which provides hope that the events of their lives directed by God's providence are good for them, but other acts of God's providence seem to run counterclockwise, that is, seem to run against them. Only when their eye of faith is fixed on the great Watchmaker, who has planned everything in His all-wise decree, do they see and understand that He has placed the mainspring of free grace within their "watch-life" so that all providential and spiritual wheels work together for their welfare. Yes, dear child of God, though much often seems counterclockwise and against you when you see one wheel of providence work within or against another wheel of grace in various afflictions and riddles, yet your wise God knows exactly what He is doing. He shall work all things together to produce a divine and blessed result according to His sovereign good pleasure and eternal counsel.

Paul allows for no exceptions to this radical promise. He writes, "*All things*" -that is, all *good* things and all *evil* things -"shall work together for good." The best things -- including the attributes and works of God, the promises and providences of the Father, the work and Person of the Son, the graces and labors of the Spirit, the everlasting covenant of grace with all its accompanying benefits of salvation, and all divine ordinances, such as the Word and the sacraments, prayer, the communion of saints — shall all work together for your real good if you are one who genuinely loves the God of the Scriptures. Even the worst things -- including divine desertion, sin, Satan, infirmities, temptations, afflictions, persecutions - shall all work together for your welfare and God's glory.

No doubt some of us will say, "It is easy to understand how good things will work together for good, and I know that evil things are supposed to serve the spiritual welfare of God's people, but how affliction, divine desertion, and even sin can work together for their good I cannot comprehend."

Today I wish to show you in several ways how even these three things — *affliction, divine desertion, and sin* -- work together for the spiritual welfare of

God's children, and from this we shall be able to safely conclude that "all things work together for good to them that love God." First, let's focus on the good that flows out of affliction for the believer, and then after we sing we will focus on how good flows out of even divine desertion and sin for the believer.

No one naturally enjoys affliction. Afflictions can be very heavy and difficult to bear. "If sin is the head of the serpent," Ralph Erskine wrote, "affliction is its tail." And yet, dear believer, do not afflictions also serve as medicine for you in the hands of your great Physician, Jesus Christ? Let's look briefly at several different ways in which in His hands your afflictions serve your spiritual welfare and eternal health.

First, through affliction doesn't the Lord humble you deeply, showing you who you are and what you remain in yourself — nothing but sin and corruption apart from divine grace? Does not the Lord teach you through affliction the same truth He taught Israel in Deuteronomy 8, "I led thee through the great and terrible wilderness, wherein were fiery serpents, and scorpions, and drought, and I fed thee in the wilderness with manna, that I might humble thee, to prove thee, to do thee good at thy latter end" (v. 2)?

Affliction not only makes a true Christian humble before God, but it keeps him humble. Affliction vacuums away the fuel that feeds his pride. An afflicted believer resembles a fruit-laden tree; the tree that hangs lowest to the ground is usually the tree that bears the most fruit.

If God uses your afflictions to humble you before Him, do not your afflictions work together for good?

Second, through affliction God's people learn what sin is in its God-dishonoring, defiling, and damning nature. Through affliction they learn, as has been aptly stated, "that sin has the devil for its father, shame for its companion, and death for its wages. They learn through affliction that sin is actually an attack upon the very heart and being and attributes of God. As John Bunyan wrote, "Sin is the daring of God's justice, the rape of His mercy, the jeering of His patience, the slighting of His power, and the contempt of His love." They learn through affliction that sin is both the strength of their death and the death of their strength.

In affliction the believer's soul is, as it were, searched with candles (Zeph. 1:12) for secret and open sins. When affliction is sanctified by the Holy Spirit, sin is dragged out of its hiding place in the heart and set in the light of God's holy and all-searching eye. "Thou hast set our iniquities before thee, our secret sins in the light of thy countenance" (Psa 90:8). Affliction strips off the Adam-like fig-leaf covering God's child strives to cling to by nature, "The sins of God's people are like birds' nests," wrote William Bridge, "as long as leaves are on the trees you cannot see them, but in the winter of affliction when all the leaves are off, the bird nests appear plainly." When affliction is sanctified, sin becomes heinous and hated. Sin becomes exceeding sinful in its very nature. It becomes hated more for its nature than for its consequences.

Third, the Holy Spirit uses affliction as a medicine to destroy the deadly disease of sin in the children of God, causing them to bring forth healthy and godly fruit. When sin causes the believer to backslide from his Savior, the Lord Jesus as Good Shepherd must send the rod of affliction to set the crooked believer straight. Affliction is the Shepherd's dog, sent out not to devour the sheep, but to bring them back into the fold again. Sanctified affliction cures sin. "Before I was afflicted I went astray," David confesses, "but now have I kept thy word" (Ps. 119:67).

It is as good for a child of God to be chastised with affliction as it is for a young tree to be pruned (John 15:2), for the pressure of affliction not only presses out the awful stink of sin, but also sends forth the fragrant smells and fruits of divine graces. Do you know that in some countries trees will grow, but will bear no fruit because there is no winter there? The Christian needs winter-times of affliction if he is to experience spring-times of blossoming, summer-times of growing, and autumn-times of harvesting.

The life of God's children is like a bell — the harder it is hit, the better it sounds. They learn more under the rod that strikes them than under the staff that comforts them. No, the Good Shepherd is not drowning His sheep when He washes them nor killing them when He shears them. Rather, His washings are needed cleanings; His shearings are necessary strippings; His corrections are essential lessons.

Affliction reaps golden fruit. It mines, smelts, refines, and forms the believer until the divine goldsmith can see His reflection in the work of His own hands.

Then the child of God experiences with Job, "When he hath tried me, I shall come forth as gold" (Job 23:10). "Affliction," wrote the godly Robert Leighton, "is the diamond dust that heaven polishes its jewels with."

Fourth, the Lord uses affliction as a means to cause His people to seek Him, to bring them back into communion with Himself, and to keep them close by His side. As sheep will stay close by their shepherd in storms, so the Lord said of Israel, "In their affliction they will seek me early" (Hos. 5:15). The storms and stones of affliction only force God's sheep closer to their Shepherd. All the stones that hit Stephen only knocked him closer to the chief cornerstone, Jesus Christ, and opened heaven all the more for his soul. Affliction drove a woman of Canaan to the Son of David; it drove a dying thief to a dying Savior. Not the crown of Manasseh, but his chains were used to bring him to the knowledge that "the Lord was God" (2 Chr. 33:11-13). Even the magnet of God's rich mercy does not bring nor keep His flock so close to the Great Shepherd as do the cords of affliction.

Fifth, the Lord uses afflictions for good to conform His flock to Christ, making them partakers of His suffering and His image. "Christ was chastened for our profit," the author to the Hebrews wrote, "that we might be partakers of his holiness" (12:10). God had but one Son without sin, but none without affliction. His afflicting rod is a pencil to draw Christ's image more fully upon His people. Through the way of suffering to glory they become followers of the Lamb of God who walks before His flock. Every path of affliction they encounter has already been traveled, overcome, and sanctified by their Shepherd whose stream of substitutional blood, from His circumcision to the cross, is their sure pledge that no affliction or trial shall be able to separate them from the love of God in Christ Jesus (Rom. 8:39). Their deserved suffering leads them to Christ's substitutional suffering, which in turn, makes them exclaim, "His yoke is easy and his burden is light" (Mt. 11:30). Dear believer, are not the occasions of your sufferings usually the times when you have most communion with Jesus Christ in His sufferings — whose entire life was nothing but a series of sufferings, as you can read in Isaiah 53? Can you then complain for the light crosses you have to bear as guilty sinners (2 Cor. 4:17) when you behold the heavy crosses Christ had to bear as the innocent sufferer?

Sixth, spiritual afflictions work for good because the Lord balances them with spiritual comfort and joy. David wrote, "For his anger endureth but a moment; in his favour is life: weeping may endure for a night, but joy cometh in the morning" (Psa 30:5). "Your sorrow," Christ told His disciples, "shall be turned into joy" (Jn. 16:20). He brings His people into the wilderness to speak comfortably to them (Hos. 2:14). Where godly suffering abounds, godly consolation abounds (2 Cor. 1:4-5). "God gives gifts that we may love Him, and stripes that we may fear Him," George Downname wrote; "yea, oftentimes He mixes His frowns with His favours."

The Shepherd's rod has honey at its end. God's Pauls have their prison-songs. The sweet shall follow the bitter. Joy shall come in the morning. The Lord turns their water into wine. Samuel Rutherford once wrote, "When I am in the cellar of affliction, I find the Lord's choicest wines." In affliction, God's sheep sometimes may experience sweet raptures of divine joy which lead them, as it were, to the very borders of the heavenly Canaan. At such moments they may confess with Eliphaz the Temanite, "Behold, happy is the man whom God correcteth: therefore despise not thou the chastening of the Almighty: for he maketh sore, and bindeth up: he woundeth and his hands make whole. He shall deliver thee in six troubles: yea, in seven there shall no evil touch thee" (Job 5:17-19).

Seventh, affliction also works for good by keeping God's children walking by faith and not by sight. If sensible enjoyments were always allowed to believers in this world, they would begin to love this life and live off of their spiritual provisions instead of the Provider Himself. Therefore, with their sweet meals, the Lord orders some sour sauce to help their digestion, in order that they may live not by sense, but by faith. In prosperity God's people talk of living by faith, and often darken counsel by words without knowledge; but in adversity they come to the experimental knowledge of what it means to live by faith. .

Eighth, affliction works for good in weaning Christians away from the world. A dog never bites those who live in its home, but only strangers. Affliction bites God's children so deeply because they are too little at home with the Word and ways of God, and too much at home with the world and ways of man. If they were more often at home with their Master and Shepherd in heavenly places, the afflictions would be far easier to bear. "God," says Thomas Watson, "would have

the world hang as a loose tooth which, being twitched away, doth not much trouble us."

Finally, affliction is profitable in preparing God's people for their heavenly inheritance. Affliction elevates their soul heavenwards, to look for "a city which hath foundations, whose builder and maker is God" (Heb. 11:10). Affliction paves their way for glory. "For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, worketh for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory" (2 Cor. 4:17). "He that rides to be crowned," John Trapp wrote, "will not think much of a rainy day."

Children of God, is not this enough to convince you that affliction is for your spiritual welfare -- that you "shall not want" anything necessary or good for you, both temporally and spiritually? Though the wind of affliction is contrary to your flesh, yet it pleases God to use this crosswind to blow you toward heaven. Your afflictions are tailor-made to fit you with divine precision all the way to glory. As Downname profoundly points out, "The Lord does not measure out our afflictions according to our faults, but according to our strength, and looks not at what we have deserved, but what we are able to bear." Did you ever think of affliction *this* way, dear child of God? To think of affliction this way is to think exactly the opposite of Job's friends. Job's friends said, "If you are heavily afflicted, you have heavily sinned." But Downname says — please allow me to repeat this wonderful quotation: "The Lord does not measure out our afflictions according to our faults, but according to our strength, and looks not at what we have deserved, but what we are able to bear."

Therefore, shall not all things, even affliction, work together for the welfare of God's people? And therefore, your duty, dear believer, is to do what Paul calls you to do in 1 Thessalonians 5:18, "In *every thing* [even in affliction], give thanks: for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning you." Before we go further, let us first sing from Psalter 386:5 and 7.

II. How Jesus works divine desertion together for the welfare of His people.

I trust you are now persuaded that affliction works for good in the lives of genuine Christians. Now we need to turn our attention to the even deeper questions

of how God can overrule divine desertion and even sin itself for good in the lives of His people. Let's first look at divine desertion being overruled for God.

Perhaps you ask: What about the dreadful burden of divine desertion, that is, the burden of feeling that God has withdrawn Himself and become silent in my life? How can the groan of Zion, "The LORD hath forsaken me, and my Lord hath forgotten me" (Is. 49:14), ever work for good? If Thomas Watson called divine desertion "a short hell" and Samuel Rutherford called God's silence (which lies at the heart of experiencing apparent divine desertion) the most bitter ingredient that the believer has to drink in his cup of sorrow - how can such desertion work for good?

Perhaps the best way to persuade you, if you are a true Christian, that even God's apparent desertions of you are intended for your welfare by an ascended Jesus, is to ask you a series of questions:

- Does not divine desertion drive you to prayer to seek after and prize communion with God more than ever, causing you to knock at heaven's gates with unceasing petitions?
- Does not the Lord use divine desertion to cause you to examine your own soul in order to discover, pull, and cast away the accursed weeds of sin which have caused you to desert God and Him to desert you?
- When the Holy Spirit teaches you that the most common cause of divine absence is your own sin, does this not cause you to hate sin with a holy hatred?
- Does not God use His own withdrawals in your life like a rough file to scrape off spiritual rust which all too quickly develops on your faith, hope, love, and other graces of God when they are not used regularly?
- Does not an absent God cause you to value more what heaven has given you in a saving way, so that within your soul special grace does not become common grace, nor common grace become special grace?
- Does not God's desertion serve by the Spirit's secret influences to purge you of remaining infirmities, weaning you from worldly thinking, worldly conversations, and worldly actions?
- Have you not experienced that the Holy Spirit uses the withdrawals of God

to cut off your reliance upon anything within you, such as your experiences, your humility, your prayers, your faith, and your conversion, so that you may learn to more fully believe in and rely upon Jesus Christ alone?

- Has not the Holy Spirit used divine desertion to cut off your relying upon even the gracious benefits God has given you, so that what God gives does not lord over your soul over and above the Lord Himself?
- Through God's apparent desertions are you not often taught that His delays in your life are not denials, but rather, that at His time and in His way, He will again draw close to commune with you through His Word?
- Does not the Lord sometimes hold Himself back in order to teach you that He would be righteous never to commune with you again on account of your continued sinning against Him?
- Through divine desertion does not God persuade you that He alone must be honored in His presence and His absence?

Dear believer, if you are honest, are not these fruits of divine desertion taught by the Spirit of an ascended Mediator profitable for you even though you often fight against many of them? Can you not see that the Lord brings you into the depths of desertion before you die in order to keep you from the depths of damnation after you die? At times you may even fear that He holds you above hell by desertion, but afterwards must you not confess that He does so to keep you from hell for eternity? Your desertions work for your spiritual welfare to prepare you for heaven, and to make heaven all the more heavenly when you shall finally enter into glory. Truly, even when Christ appears to absent Himself from you, He is still secretly present with you at the Father's right hand, as the Heidelberg Catechism says so beautifully, with His Godhead, majesty, grace, and Spirit (Question 47).

Dear believer, keep courage. God's temporary, apparent desertion of you is just that — temporary and only apparent. As John Flavel wrote:

Christ's desertion (of God] prevents your final desertion. Because He was forsaken for a time you shall not be forsaken for ever. For He was forsaken for you.... [Moreover,] though God deserted Christ, yet at the same time He powerfully supported Him. His omnipotent arms were under Him, though His pleased face was hid from Him.... So, Christian, just so shall it be with

thee. Thy God may turn away His face, [but] He will not pluck away His arm.

Puritan Timothy Cruso put it this way: "He who hath engaged to be our Christ for ever, cannot depart for ever,"

III. How Jesus causes even sin to serve the welfare of His people.

"All things," Paul asserts, "work together for good to them that love God." All things includes not only affliction and divine desertion, but finally, even sin. Even sin shall work together for good — not for them that love sin, but for them that love God. Rightly, Augustine has written, "God would never permit evil, if He could not bring good out of evil." Here, of course, we tread upon cautious ground, for there is nothing worse than sin; we must do all in our power to discourage, and not encourage, sin.

We have to maintain at least three important guidelines when considering how sin works to the good of God's people. First, we have to maintain there is nothing good in sin itself. Sin is the evil of evils; in and of itself it can work nothing but death and damnation. Thomas Watson wrote, "Sin is like poison, which corrupts the blood, infects the heart, and without a sovereign antidote, brings death."

Second, we have to maintain that those who encourage themselves in sin by the argument that good will come out of it, wrest the Scriptures to their own damnation. Paul is clear in Romans 3:8 that to do evil that good may come is only to make our damnation just. One of the primary marks of being a Christian is to hate all sin and to love holiness and godliness,

Third, only corrupt human nature can abuse the doctrine of good resulting from sin, for true grace can never play lightly with sin. Sin will work for good only to them that hate sin. It will work for good to them that love God and abhor themselves on account of sin. It will work for good to those who are humbled by sin, who fly to Christ to be saved from it, and who dare not allow themselves the least sin to gain an entire world. It will work for good to those who count the least sin worse than the greatest affliction. It will work for good to those who, knowing their own weakness, fight earnestly against sin, using the Word of God, the blood

of Christ, the strength of the Spirit, and fervent prayer to wage holy war against it.

Yet, though sin is worse than hell in its essence, God, through Christ, and by His mighty overruling power, directs even sin to our spiritual welfare if we are true believers. Let me explain four ways in which this is so:

First, God causes the sinfulness of sin to bring us to true self-examination and self-knowledge. Scripture tells us that the Lord permitted Hezekiah to fall to teach him that which was in his heart. When we are in our right place before God, we will not shrink from knowing the worst about ourselves, just as a cancer patient requests to know the worst of his sickness. Therefore Job prayed, "Make me to know my transgression" (13:23). By nature our sins will find us out, but by grace we find our sins out. This leads us by the Spirit to a deep and profitable self-knowledge, causing us to confess with Paul, "I am the chief sinner," or with Martin Luther, "In myself I am not only miserable, but misery itself."

Second, God uses the sinfulness of sin to bring us to genuinely condemn ourselves. True Christians are led to pronounce a sentence of condemnation upon themselves, taking God's side against themselves, Thomas Watson profoundly notes, "When a man has judged himself, Satan is put out of office. When he lays anything to a saint's charge, he is able to retort, 'It is true, Satan, I am guilty of these sins, but I have judged myself already for them; and having condemned myself in the lower court of conscience, God (for the sake of Christ) will acquit me in the upper court of heaven!'" God will never step upon a self-condemning beggar who casts himself exclusively on divine mercy. Rather, the owning of my sin as a child of the first Adam works for good by making room for the righteousness of the second Adam, Jesus Christ. God uses the greatest evil of sin to make room for the greatest good of communion with Himself. He uses condemnation to unlock, as it were, the door to salvation.

Third, the sinfulness of sin works for good in the believer by keeping him engaged in the good fight of faith. The Christian not only leads a wayfaring life, but also a *warfaring* life. His heart is a castle that is in danger of being assaulted every hour. Daily a heavy duel is fought between two seeds, for "the spirit lusts against the flesh" (Gal. 5:17). "Watch and pray" should be the daily, yes, hourly motto of our lives as believers.

Fourth, an awareness of the sinfulness of sin can also yield the profitable fruit of spiritual reformation. When God permits His people to fall into sin, His normal design is to break the back of that sin they have fallen into. Abraham stumbled in faith, but became a champion of faith. Moses stumbled in meekness, but was a champion of meekness. Peter stumbled in zeal, but became the champion of godly zealousness. God makes His children's maladies their medicines when He gives grace to them not only to find out their sin, but also to drive out their sin.

I cannot conclude without a serious warning: Remember, dear believer, though the Lord directs even sin to end in good, allow me to warn you never to make light of sin, nor to become bold in sinning. Sin will always cost you a high price. Just as grace is always amazing, sin is always dreadful. Remember David. Sin cost him his peace, a broken family, and the terrors of the Almighty. Though the Lord shall never damn His child, He will have them taste something of the bitterness of hell in this life when they tamper with sin. He chastises sin by placing them into such bitter agonies and soul-distress that they can sometimes be filled with horror and be drawn to the brink of despair.

Oh, that the dread character of sin, as well as its consequences, might serve as flaming swords to keep you from eating of the forbidden tree of iniquity!

Dear unconverted friend, if you are not born again, no affliction and no sin, yes, nothing will serve your good. Sin can only work death and damnation for you unless you learn to flee to God by faith and in repentance, casting yourself upon His mercy in and through the ascended Mediator, Jesus Christ. By nature, through sin we ask God for the shortest way to hell. We would rather sleep our way into damnation than sweat our way into salvation.

Dear friend, dear teenagers, dear children, do not forget that the damned shall live in hell as long as God Himself shall live in heaven. If you refuse to believe in Christ, you will end in hell one day. And there you will be constantly dying without ever being dead. In hell there is no relief, no intermission, no end to the wrath of God.

Dear friends, allow me to ask you a final question: Can you answer on one hand with Chrysostom when sent a threatening message from the empress, "Go tell her that I fear nothing but sin," and can you answer on the other hand with a godly

forefather when offered promotion by King George III, "Sir, I want nothing but more grace"? For those who hate sin and love grace, God shall fulfil His own promise, notwithstanding affliction, desertion, and sin: "All things work together for good to them that love God." Amen.