

## In Everything God Works for Good: A Study of Romans 8:28-29

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Romans 8:28-29 presents three possibilities in interpreting the subject of the phrase “in everything *God* works for good with those who love God,” namely, the Holy Spirit, all things, or God Himself. The translation of the Holy Spirit as the subject of the phrase is found in NEB—“and in everything, as we know, *he* co-operates for good with those who love God.” The subsequent verses do not support this translation since Jesus was never called as the son of the Holy Spirit. Next, grammatically “all things” could become the subject of the phrase—“and we know that *all things* work together for good to them that love God.” Paul, however, shows that God Alone who is able to cause “all things” work for good to all his believers—“and we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him.” RSV

**Key words:** All things, God’s work, good.

The message in Romans 8:28-29 points out the Christian assurance to those who believe and love God. These verses have brought comfort and encouragement for Christians down through the centuries. However, some still can hardly believe that “in everything God works for good with those who love him.” In sufferings and other catastrophic experiences in life, catastrophic experiences in life, many believers have found it difficult to accept this assertion. The question that is usually asked in connection with these verses is “How can this sad experience to His children for the purpose of good?”

The phrase “in everything God works for good with those who love God” presents another problem. In the light of the Greek Language, the word “everything,” which in Greek is *panta*, can be either nominative or accusative. The question that needs to be asked is “Is there any possibility that ‘all things’ by themselves can work good things for those who love God?”

There are three possibilities for the subject of vv. 28-29, namely. **The Spirit**, which is supported by the immediate context, or *panta* which is grammatically possible, or “**He**” (God), which in some of the manuscripts is explicitly expressed. This article endeavors to determine the subject of those verses.

## **HISTORICAL SETTING**

### **The Author**

The book of Romans was written by Paul the apostle. The book has a peculiar position since it is only one he wrote to a congregation that was strange to him (Nygren, 1949; Barth, 1968; Bruce, 1985)

### **Literary Form**

Even though the form of the book of Romans is a letter, one has to put in mind however, that this latter is not a private letter. It was meant to be read in the congregations (Kasemann, 1980). This letter was addressed to Rome, and it was written in Greek, since the Greek language was far more familiar language to Paul than Aramaic or Hebrew. The language was also used to a very large extent in Italy at that time (Bruce, 1985).

A letter usually has a few purposes, such as conveying information, making requests, or maintaining personal contacts with the recipient (s) or reader (s) of the letter. In this letter, Paul conveyed some information, such as in 1:13, "I want you to know, brethren, that I have often intended to come to you (but thus far have been prevented), in order that I may reap some harvest among you as well as among the rest of the Gentiles." He made a request in 15:30: "I appeal to you, brethren, by our Lord Jesus Christ and by the love of the Spirit, to strive together with me in your prayers to God." In the same letter, there are other requests, such as in 16:1-2, 17,19. Moreover, Paul in this letter seeks to maintain good relations with its recipients (1:6-15, 16:3-16).

### **Readers or Recipients**

According to Rom 1:7, the letter is addressed to the church in Rome: "To all God's beloved in Rome, who are called to be saints." Some of them were Gentile Christians and some Christians from a Jewish background (Rom 1:5, 11-15). The majority of the Christians in Rome were Gentile Christians with a kernel of Jewish Christians (Kasemann, 1980; Guthrie, 1977; Sanday & Headlam, 1896).

### **Date and Place of Writing**

In writing the epistle, Paul told the Romans that he had completed the preaching of the gospel, sweeping round from Jerusalem to Illyricum (15:19). Now he was on the way to go to Jerusalem, to present to the church there the financial aid raised for them by the churches of Macedonia and Achaia (15:25-26). He expected that when that was done, he would be able to visit them as last on his way for missionary work in Spain (15:24,28), so that he could fulfill his desire to see the Roman Christians (15:23; 1:10-13).

Paul wrote Romans in Greece, probably at Corinth, the capital city of the Roman province of Achaia. The third missionary journey of Paul is usually dated between 53-57. So the date of writing of this letter can be supposed to be 56 or 57 AD (Hunter, 1995). At this time the Jews in Rome were estimated at about 40,000 to 50,000 people (Dunn, 1988).

## THE CONTEXT OF ROMANS 8:28-29

Paul starts from 1:16 explaining what is real meaning of the gospel. From chap. 1 to chap. 3 Paul describes how the righteousness of God is revealed in the gospel. Men are all alike, all are under sin. In regard to their salvation, there is nothing that men can boast of.

From the end of chap. 3 up to chap. 5, however, Paul points out the grace of God which is given freely to those who will accept God's offer. Faith is the basis of receiving justification, the promise of righteousness. The role of faith in justification is clearly portrayed in chap. 4. Chapter 5 accentuates that all the gifts of God (God's grace) and righteousness came through Jesus Christ. In 5:1-5 Paul gives the summary of justification through faith.

Chap. 5 deals also with the question of how a sinner becomes justified before God. It shows the first effect of the righteousness of God, which is salvation and life through Jesus Christ. Chapter 6 presents the second effect of the righteousness of God, which is the newness of life and sanctification (Lenski, 1936).

Paul presents how humankind are delivered from the power of sin (chap. 6). The believers died to sin and now are alive in Christ. He used the analogy of slaves to explain what God can do for humankind, and how they can become slaves of righteousness (v. 18) and slaves to God (v. 22), which will lead them to holiness, with the result of having eternal life.

The function of the law in the life of persons that have been renewed in Christ is dealt in chap. 7. In this chapter Paul used the analogy of marriage to show the binding nature of law, for life. Realizing the power of the law of sin and death, Paul exclaimed, "Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!" we serve the law of sin (v. 25).

In chap. 8 Paul shows the utter helplessness of anyone in any way to effect his own salvation. He discusses the help, control, and guidance of the Holy Spirit in the hearts and lives of the assurance of God and the consolation for hope. Paul in this section (vv. 28-29) makes a beautiful and free turn; he leads from the idea of the suffering of the glory which awaits them.

Also, it is interesting to note that the Trinity is all active—God the Father, Christ the Son, and the Holy Spirit. However, God the Spirit is explicitly seen in these verses (vv. 18-39), especially up to v. 27.

In the midst of the groaning world as Paul asserts in 8:22, "the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to this present time," and "we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait for the adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies" (v. 23, NIV). The Spirit himself will help us in our weakness, and makes our prayers what they should be (v. 26), and "the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God" (v. 27).

The passage in 8:28-30 forms a kind of climax to the teaching in vv. 18-27, and the passage in vv. 18-30 stands as the climax of the discussion in chap. 8 (Hiebert, 1991). Dunn (1988) even suggests that vv. 18-30 form the climax to chaps. 1:18-30.

## ANALYSIS OF ROMANS 8:28-29

### The text

28. *We know that in everything God works for good with those who love him, who are called according to his purpose.* 29. *For those whom he foreknew he also fore destined to be conformed to the image of this Son, in order that he might be the First-born among many brethren.*

### Comments on Words and Phrases

The beginning phrase *oidamen de hoti tois agaposin ton thein* can be translated as “and we know that for those who love God.” The particle *de* has been understood in two ways: *de* understood as adversative (Godet, 1965), which is translated as “but”, or *de* understood as transitional (Murray, 1968, p. 314).

It seems that Paul did not intend to emphasize *de* as adversative or to mark a contrast, since if he did, then he should have marked it in some way or other, or at least by the stronger adversative *alla* (Hiebert, 1991).

The verb *oidamen*, which means “we know,” “we are sure,” “we perceive,” or “it is clear to us” occurred about thirty times in the epistles (Newell, 1938, p.327), of which six are found in Romans (2:2; 3:19; 7:14; 8:22, 26, 28). This verb *oidamen* denotes “the knowledge of faith and not mere intellectual investigation” (Lenski, 1936, p. 550) It is the knowledge not so much of personal experience, though some may already have been able to attest things working out for good in their own personal circumstances (Dunn, 1988, p. 480).

The phrase *tois agaposin ton theon* is placed forward for the sake of emphasis (lenski, 1936, p. 550). *Tois agaposin* is dative of advantage “for those who love God,” all things will work together “for those who love God,” all things will work together for good. The present participle *agaposin*, with the root *agapoa* which appears here for the first time in Romans (Dunn, 1988, p. 480), characterizes these people by their love for God (Brooks & Winbery, 1979). Paul does not often use the term *tois agaposin ton theon* to describe Christians. Except here, it is found only twice in his writings (1 Cor 2:9; 8:3 f/ *tonagaponton ton kurion*, Eph 6:24; Nygren, 1949). The article *ton* in front of *theon* denotes the God that they serve and love.

The central assertion of verse 28 is the truth that everything works for good (*panta synergei eis agathon*). If this phrase stands alone, these four words can be translated as the King James Version (KJV), where *panta* is taken as the subject of the phrase—“And we know that *all things* work together for good to them that love God.” Of course, this translation can be right, since according to Greek grammar, a neuter plural subject can take a singular verb (Dana & Mantey, 1927). Therefore, *panta* standing before the singular verb *synergei* naturally may be taken as its subject (barth, 1968; Crenfield, 1985).

The word *panta*, however, can be taken either as nominative or accusative (Cranfield, 1985). The textual variants, such as Papyrus 46, uncials A dan B, cursive 81 and the Sahidic Coptic version, which added *ho theos* as the subject, indicate that *panta* may be taken as emphatic object of the verb (Hiebert, 1991). The view of taking *ho theos* as the subject of the sentence can be seen in the translation of RSV and NIV – “And we know that in all things *God* works for the good of those who love him” (Bruce, 1985).

Another view of the subject of the sentence is that the Spirit is the intended subject (Robinson, 1979). This view asserts that the Spirit mentioned in v. 26 should become the true subject of the verb. This stand can be seen in the translation of NEB--“and in everything, as we know, *he* cooperates for good with those who love God.”

However, v. 29 makes this view hard to be accepted. If the *pneuma* (Spirit) is the subject, then v. 29 would be read as “for those whom he (the Spirit) foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his (the Spirit’s) Son.” And this is impossible, for nowhere in Scripture is Jesus Christ called the Son of the Holy Spirit (Hibert, 1991).

The most probable subject of the verb *synergei* is “He” or “God,” since whether or not the word “God” is introduced, it is God who causes all things to work together in our lives for ultimate good” (Maxwell, 1980; Wuest, 1973). Theologically, this interpretation seems to be right.

Next, the word *panta*, “all things” or “everything” (Moulton, 1978) has no indicated restrictions. Some of the things that are in the mind of Paul are named in v. 35 and vv. 38-39. Everything that happens to those who love God, whether it is a good or painful experience, the sad as well as the glad, the things that perplex and disappoint as well as the things they eagerly strive for, all will at the end by the providence of God, work together for good according to His purpose.

The present tense verb *synergei*, can have the sense of “to work together with, to cooperate” (Moulton, 1978), to work hand in hand, one thing working in mutuality with the rest (Lenski, 1936) to bring about good for God’s lovers. However, for the form with, *eis*, Dunn (1988) suggests that to “contribute toward, help to bring about” are closer to Paul’s meaning. And he notes that “the pious hope that everything will work out for the best for the godly is ‘a common axiom of antiquity’ (Kasemann, 1980).”

*Eis agathon* can be either the accusative of purpose or the accusative of result. If *eis agathon* is compared to the next phrase of v. 28, “according to his purpose” and also to v. 18, in which it states that “the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us,” and to 5:3-4, “we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope does not disappoint us,” it seems that *eis agathon* is the intended result of the verb *synergei*. Then the accusative of purpose will be right for *eis agathon* (Brooks & Winbery, 1979, p. 55). So, in the providence of God, all things “work together with or cooperate in” the achievement of the intended good.

The articular participial construction *tois kata prothesin kletois ousin* again indicates the character of the distinct group in view (Hibert, 1991). This is the second limitation that Paul placed upon those who will enjoy *panta synergei eis agathon*.

The phrase *tois kata prothesin kletois ousin* is not the human’s experience or effort but rather the divine purpose (Newell, 1938). “Called according to his purpose” is a necessary qualification for Paul, since without these words, the impression might have been given that “divine cooperation or working together” was somehow a reward for loving God.

The *kletois*, as Lenski notes, “is the term used in the pregnant sense and includes the acceptance. The verbal is passive and involves God as the agent who called and the gospel as the divine means and the power by which he called” (Newell, 1938). Thus *kletois* may also imply that the call has been obeyed (Sanday & Headlam, 1986, p. 330).

The noun *prothesin*, from *protithemi* or *prothesis*, literally means “a setting forth or before, predetermination, purpose” (Moulton, 1978). Here, *prothesion* denotes the purpose of

God set forth ahead of time, which is now working toward the accomplishment of God's intended result or goal. In the opening of v. 29, *hoti* introduces the reason why all things work together for good to those who love God and have been called according to His purpose (Sanday & Headlam, 1986; Hiebert, 1991).

The use of the personal relative pronoun *ous* in the phrase *hoti ous proegnō, kai proōrisen symmorphous tes eikonos tou huiou autou*, and the use of the demonstrative pronoun *toutous* in v. 30, shows that God's plan is related to individuals, not merely to the experiences they undergo (Hiebert, 1991). The verb *proegnō* comes from the root *proginōskō*, which in its verb and noun forms is used seven times in the NT. Twice is related to man, where it means "previous knowledge based upon circumstances" (Acts 26:5; 2 Pet 3:17), and five times it is related to God (Acts 2:23; Rom 8:29, 11:2; 1Pet 1:2,20; Wuest, 1973).

*Proegnō* means "to know beforehand, to be previously acquainted with, to determine beforehand, to foreordain, to foreknew, to appoint as the subject (s) of future privileges" (Moulton, 1978). This word *proegnō* actually consists of two words, the preposition *pro* which means before, and the verb *ginōskō* which means to know, so the *pro* in this *proegnō* shows the time of the verb *ginōskō*.

The second verb in v. 29 is *proōrisen*. The word *kai* which precedes *proōrisen* shows the apparent progression of thought (Murray, 1968). Here the preposition *pro* appears again, which dates the action of the verb *horizo* in the past. *Horize* means "to set bounds to, to bound; to restrict, to determine, appoint, fix, set" (Moulton 1978). So *kai proōrisen* can be translated as "he also predetermined". The two prepositions *pro* in vv. 28-29 shows that the action was taken by God in the past, and it gives the assurance to the Christians :that their part in the people of God is not accidental or random, but part of a divine purpose whose outworking was already clearly envisaged from the beginning" (Dunn, 1988, p. 482). So the two verbs, *proegnō* and *proōrisen*, which mean "foreknew and predetermined" indicate that God's plan for the redeemed began in eternity past and reaches into eternity future (Hiebert, 1991).

The indicated or intended goal is found in the phrase *symmorphous tes eikonos tou huiou autou*--to be conformed to the image of His Son. This goal, Murray (1968) comments, exhibits not only the dignity of the ordination but also the greatness of the love from which the appointment flows. Dunn (1988) states that "it is the sureness of the end as determined from the beginning which Paul wishes to emphasize.

The word *symmorphoō* is a compound word, which means "to give same form" (Arndtm Ginfich & Danker, 1979, p. 778), "to bring to the same form with some other person or thing" (Wuest, 1973, p. 145) or "to conform" (Dunn, 1988, p. 483). It is the purpose of God (v. 29) that all His children be conformed to the image of His Son (*tes eikonos tou huiou autou*).

The word 'image' is *eikon*, a derived likeness. This word indicates that the image is not accidental but derived, as the likeness of the child is derived from its parents. Through the new birth we become children of Christ (Heb 2:13), and thus inherit His image (Wuest, 1973).

The closing statement in v. 29 states that the ultimate aim in God's redemptive program is the preeminence of Jesus Christ as *prototokon en pollois adelphois*, 'the first-born among many brethren'. This expression involves both His distinctiveness and His identity with the vast redeemed family of God (Hiebert, 1991).

## THEOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

Romans 8:28-29 occupies a place in the passage that plays a key role in the structure of Paul's argument (8: 18-30), which is the climax of the discussion in chap. 8 (Dunn, 1988). When Paul used the word *oidamen* at the beginning of v. 28, he assumes that he and his readers have the same opinion regarding what is happening "to those who love God." The assurance to us, it is according to God's purpose. This is a remarkable statement for the apostle Paul to make, considering how much he had suffered because of his love for God and His truth.

But "why does God allow sad things and painful experiences to happen to His beloved ones?" This type of question had been asked also by Jacob, when Jacob's sons, who had gone to Egypt to buy food, came back without their brother Simeon, and reported that next time Benjamin must also go to Egypt. Jacob cried out in despair, "Me have ye bereaved of my children: Joseph is not, and Simeon is not, and ye will take Benjamin away; **all these things are against me**" (Gen. 42:36, KJV. But at the end Jacob met Joseph, and God's purpose for good was finally seen by Jacob, Joseph, and all his brothers as well. Joseph said "As for you (Joseph's brothers), you meant evil against me; but God meant it for good" (Gen 50:20).

David, having experienced both good and sad things, declares, "I have been young, and now am old; yet I have not seen the righteous forsaken or his children begging for bread" (Ps 37:25). For him, God is always with His children. God knows what their very needs are.

The words "called according to his purpose" (v. 28) refer to the working in men of the everlasting purpose of God, where by before the foundations of the world were laid, He had purposed to deliver humankind from curse and damnation, and to bring them to everlasting salvation through Jesus Christ, the Savior (Wuest, 1973).

There are a few possibilities of finding the subject of the verb *synergei*, but it seems that God is the One who works all things together for good. It is God who makes "all things work together" in believers' lives "for good." Paul, in chap. 3, points out that all men are under the power of sin. All are alike in that all have sinned against God. "According to Paul, man effects nothing, God everything, and that too by circumstances (Hermann, 1983).

In v. 29, Paul proceeds to explain how all things can work together for good. God "foreknew" (*proegnō*) and then "predestined" or "predetermined," and in v. 30, "those whom he predestined he also called: and those whom he called he also justified: and those whom he justified he also glorified."

When Paul says that God "foreknew," he meant that from eternity past, God knew who from among the population of the world through out history would accept His grace which comes through Jesus Christ our Savior. God knows what each one is going to do, but He does not make it inevitable that a person will do it. Although God does not force anyone to make the right spiritual choice, He does try to influence people to do His will, because His will is the best way.

Nygren (1949) comments on these verses (29-30) that from eternity God has foreknown and chosen those who now believe in Christ. He has foreordained them to be conformed to the likeness of His son; He has called them and justified them. In v. 30, the glorification is still in the future, and we might expect that Paul would use the future tense and say "those whom he justified he will also glorify in eternity."

"To be conformed to the image of his Son" is clearly portrayed in vv. 28-29 as the goal of God's calling, foreknowing and predestining those who love God. The words "*syn*", "*morphe*" and *eikōnos* express the gradual change in us till we acquire the likeness of Christ,

the Son of God, so that we ourselves shall ultimately have the family likeness of sons and daughters of God (Robinson, 1979).

## CONCLUSION

Paul asserts In chap. 8 that we are not in the flesh but in the Spirit. And those who live according to the Spirit, and set their minds on the Spirit will have life and peace (v. 6). This is a wonderful promise, but since we are still living in the sinful world, bad things still might happen to us.

In explaining the sufferings that were present at the time when he wrote this epistle in v. 18, Paul confirms that “the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us.” And since we are weak, the Spirit helps us, and intercedes for us according to the will of God (vv. 26-27).

Paul, in vv. 28-29 and up to v. 30, assures us that for “those who love God,” those who are “called,” those whom God “foreknew” and “predetermined” from eternity past, “God will work all things for good.” “To those who love God” shows that this is not “universalism.” Not all men will enjoy this promise, but only those who respond to God’s call.

The “good” that happens to “those who love God” does not come merely because of man’s efforts to love God. Our love is the blessed effect of God’s purpose and call. It is God who, because of His love to His children, works all things for good. God (*ho theos*-implied) is the subject of the sentences in vv. 28-29. “All things” (*panta*) cannot become the subject of *synergei*, since only God can cause all things to work together in our lives for ultimate good.

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