

Luck or Providence? (Romans 8:28)

Sermon Transcript by Rev. Ernest O'Neill

Karl Marx described religion as "the opium of the masses" you remember. Do you know what he meant by that? Really, he meant that a verse like "all things work together for good to them that love God", which is the popular translation of Romans 8:28 – a verse like that was being used by the governing classes to keep the proletariat, or the people, or the workers, or the masses from being discontented with their lot. And so he said, you see it is the opium of the masses, it's the drug that keeps people lulled into a contentment with their present lot. And so he regarded religion as one of the instruments that the governing classes used to keep the workers and the peasants under their control. And really it is a common misinterpretation loved ones of Romans 8:28.

That is, the idea that your present state is God's absolute ideal best for you and so don't question it, just stay exactly where you are and if God wants to change it he'll change it for you, but you just accept it as it is and don't do anything about it. It sounds close to Christian contentment except that it lays emphasis on the fact that if anything is to happen to change it God will do it, don't you do anything about it. And it lays emphasis on the fact that this is God's absolute ideal best for you. Not his permissive will for you under the circumstances, but his absolute ideal best -- so you just stay where you are -- and rest at that. What it results in is of course disastrous. It results in absolute social irresponsibility, personal passivity, and just a readiness to let things remain as they are for the rest of your life and really it is the kind of fatalism that runs through eastern religions.

Things are as they are today because the gods have ordained it this way. It is this kind of passivity that has paralyzed a sleeping giant like India. The economy hangs in chaos because people are continually thinking, "Well all things work together for good. Things are as good as they can be. We can't do anything about it and the next life will bring an improvement. So, let's not rock the boat, let's just keep it as it is." And really loved ones, I think that attitude runs through a lot of people who say they believe in the Father of Jesus. They have this idea that you can't change it and it's not your responsibility to change it. Your destiny is fixed by God's will irrespective of whether your will cooperates or fails to cooperate with him or not, just take it as true. All things work together for good to them that love God. It will all come out right in the end. You just bear with it, put up. And so loved ones, I think many of us really do just that.

We have the idea that the will of God has determined the way our lives will go and all we can do is accept them and know that somehow things will come out right in the end. Now loved ones because of that misinterpretation of the verse I think it is good to read the Revised Standard Version and maybe you would do that. It's Romans 8:28

"We know that in everything God works for good with those who love him, who are called according to his purpose." "We know that in everything God works for good with those who love him, who are called according to his purpose." Now do you see loved ones, it doesn't say all THINGS work for good -- because that's of course where that fatalistic streak comes into Christianity and rules the eastern religions. The idea that these mighty forces and events and circumstances, they work themselves out for good. They impress themselves upon my life, they are the impersonal, domineering, overwhelming force that is exerted by a divine puppeteer up there and I can do nothing about it. That's the impression that comes over when you make all THINGS work together for good as the subject of the sentence. You get the impression, all things, well yeah but who works the "all

things” or what are the “all things”? Well, they are just events. Whereas, you can see here the Bible says, “God works for good and works for good with those who love him.”

In other words, it is not God operating independent of you and me, it's God working together with us. He does some things and we do some things. God, you remember, we said two weeks ago, will not act against his own will but he cannot act apart from our wills. God cannot just come down and touch a dear one who is under cancer unless some of us realize he wants to do that and asks him to do it. That's why you remember Jesus said, “Be it unto you according to your faith.” Not according to the movements of blind, impersonal, faithful circumstances, but be it unto you according to your faith. As you believe so God will be able to act in your life.

It ties up with other verses. First Corinthians 3:9 talks about us being coworkers together with God. So the whole teaching of Scripture is that God works with us and he does some things and we do some things. This is the real answer to Marx and to his accusation. It is the real answer to all critics of Christianity that down through history God has worked with people. And so the first schools were started in the western world by Christians who believed that God would use them to renew people's minds. The first hospitals in the western worlds were started by Christians who believed that God would use them to heal people's bodies. The first trade unions in England were started by Christians who believed that God would use them to bring justice into the economic world. The first scientists were Christians who believed that God would use it to restore order to his world. Every piece of progress that has occurred in the western world has come from people who believed that if they took a step, the Father would take a step. And it's completely different from this other attitude that says, “Oh no, it will all work itself out.”

Now, loved ones it is also different from another attitude. Do you see that it is not man passive and God active. That's the fatalism of eastern religions and of much of Christendom: man passive and God active. But, neither is it man active and God passive, man doing everything and God doing nothing. Which I would remind you is the real spirit that lies behind popular idioms like “you're the answer to your own prayers”. No, you can't be the answer to your own prayers. There are some things that you can't do with all your prayers; you're not the answer to your own prayers. Or “God helps those who help themselves. Get out, God helps those who help themselves.” No, it's God works together with us. God wills and reveals his will to us -- what he wants to do in a situation. We perceive his will and either believe accordingly or obey accordingly and then God releases his power into the situation.

Now do you see that loved ones? I should just mention it again. God has a will for every situation in our lives today. He knows exactly what he wants to do in your present situation. Now he wants to reveal that to you so that you can begin to work together with him on it. Otherwise he may want this chair moved over here and you're busy tugging it over here and you're going this way and he's going that way. So God wants to reveal his will to you and you perceive his will and then he lets you know whether you are to obey him in a certain area or believe him for a certain thing. And, in the light of your response to God he releases his power in to the situation. And that's what this verse means, “God works for good with those who love him.”

Now loved ones an example of it would be I King 18:22. There was one prophet left, you remember in Israel --- and about 500 prophets of the Asherah and 50 prophets of Baal, 450 prophets of Baal. I Kings 18:22. “Then Elijah said to the people, ‘I, even I only, am left a prophet of the LORD; but Baal's prophets are four hundred and fifty men. Let two bulls be given to us; and let them choose

one bull for themselves, and cut it in pieces and lay it on the wood, but put no fire to it; and I will prepare the other bull and lay it on the wood, and put no fire to it. And you call on the name of your god and I will call on the name of the LORD; and the God who answers by fire, he is God.' And all the people answered, 'It is well spoken.'

Elijah did not say, "There are 450 prophets of Baal and there are 500 prophets of Asherah. Well, just let's sit here. All things work together for good for them that love him." He knew that the Father would work with him if he could see what the Father wanted to do. And so he sought God's will and saw what God wanted to do and he did his part.

Then would you look to verse 37. "Answer me, O LORD, answer me," -- and he believed God -- "That this people may know that thou, O LORD, art God, and that thou hast turned their hearts back.' Then the fire of the LORD fell, and consumed the burnt offering, and the wood, and the stones, and the dust, and licked up the water that was in the trench. And when all the people saw it, they fell on their faces; and they said, 'The LORD, he is God; the LORD, he is God.'" So that's God's way of working.

Now would you go back with me to Romans 8:28, loved ones. Do you see the first two words in the verse, the first two words? "We know." Now, how do we know? Now the strange thing is that you don't know through other people telling you how God worked out some bad situations that they were in. It is very interesting, but that's not how you come to an assurance that God will do the same in your life. It's strange, you think it will. I used to think, "If somebody would tell me how they were helped out of a hideous situation, I knew it would help me." And, it appears to help us, but actually we can always deceive ourselves into believing that our situation is worse than theirs was. And so other people's experiences don't really reassure us. They may confirm the method by which we really know. How do we really know? We know because Jesus is God's son and he was always doing that kind of thing himself.

He came along to some lepers and he healed them. He came along to a woman caught in adultery and being accused by all other religious leaders and he forgave her. He came along to somebody else who had lost something and he helped them. And Jesus says, "He that hath seen me has seen the father." And we know that our Creator is like Jesus. Every time Jesus came to a situation which was bad he started to work to improve it. He never left it, he always began to improve it and change it. And so we know Jesus always did that kind of thing. Moreover, he himself says that his Father does this kind of thing.

Would you look at that where it says that. It's Luke 12:27. Jesus says, "Consider the lilies, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin; yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass which is alive in the field today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, how much more will he clothe you, O men of little faith! And do not seek what you are to eat and what you are to drink, nor be of anxious mind. For all the nations of the world seek these things; and your Father knows that you need them. Instead, seek his kingdom, and these things shall be yours as well."

And Jesus says, "The Father knows what you need in every situation." And he is always working to change and transform the situation. He's the one that made it so that when you unzip the old skin it automatically zips up itself. He made it that way. He didn't make it so that it zips opens and stays open and you bleed to death every time you get a cut. He's the one that made it so that there are healing powers that every time a thing goes wrong, a power works to make it right. The Father

is the one who thought of these things, loved ones. He's the one who makes things heal. He's the one who has built into our world constant repair mechanisms that operate to bring health and bring success and victory to us. So Jesus is saying, "Look, my Father is that kind of person. Every time he comes into a situation that is bad, he's always working to improve it." God is always working in everything. With those of us who love him, he's always working with us for good. And so the reason we know that God does this kind of thing is because we know his nature. It's not by all the experiences that people tell us about, it's because we know this is the kind of God our God is. He doesn't come by and see a person who has been robbed and leave them lying in a ditch, he begins to work with them to rectify the situation.

So I know that he is doing it in my situation. I know Father that you are trying to get through to me, you're trying to show me what you want to do to change my situation. Lord thank you. And of course, we can see that that is the kind of way he operated down through the years in the Bible. Maybe you'd look at old Joseph, who I think could probably beat any of us in catastrophes and tragedies. Genesis 37. And it is just an up and down alternating experience of tragedy and triumph right through. Genesis 37:3. "Now Israel loved Joseph more than any other of his children because he was the son of his old age; and he made him a long robe with sleeves. But when his brothers saw that their father loved him more than all his brothers, they hated him, and could not speak peaceably to him." And then verse 23, "So when Joseph came to his brothers, they stripped him of his robe, the long robe with sleeves that he wore; and they took him and cast him into a pit. The pit was empty, there was no water in it." And then verse 28, "Then Midianite traders passed by; and they drew Joseph up and lifted him out of the pit, and sold him to the Ishmaelites for twenty shekels of silver; and they took Joseph to Egypt." But God was working all the time.

And Genesis 39:1-5: "Now Joseph was taken down to Egypt, and Poti-phar, an officer of Pharaoh, the captain of the guard, an Egyptian, bought him from the Ishmaelites who had brought him down there. The LORD was with Joseph, and he became a successful man; and he was in the house of his master the Egyptian, and his master saw that the LORD was with him, and that the LORD caused all that he did to prosper in his hands. So Joseph found favor in his sight and attended him, and he made him overseer of his house and put him in charge of all that he had. From the time that he made him overseer in his house and over all that he had the LORD blessed the Egyptian's house for Joseph's sake; the blessing of the LORD was upon all that he had, in house and field." And then in Genesis 39:19, you remember Potiphar's wife compromised Joseph by lying in Verse 19. "When his master heard the words which his wife spoke to him, 'This is the way your servant treated me,' his anger was kindled. And Joseph's master took him and put him into the prison, the place where the king's prisoners were confined, and he was there in prison." But again God is working together with him for good. "But the LORD was with Joseph and showed him steadfast love, and gave him favor in the sight of the keeper of the prison. And the keeper of the prison committed to Joseph's care all the prisoners who were in the prison; and whatever was done there, he was the doer of it." And, God continues to work with him.

Genesis 41:37. You remember Pharaoh has a dream and Joseph is called for out of the prison. "His proposal seemed good to Pharaoh and to all his servants. And Pharaoh said to his servants, 'Can we find such a man as this, in whom is the Spirit of God?' So Pharaoh said to Joseph, 'Since God has shown you all this, there is none so discreet and wise as you are; you shall be over my house, and all my people shall order themselves as you command; only as regards the throne will I be greater than you.' And Pharaoh said to Joseph, 'Behold, I have set you over all the land of Egypt'."

And we know that if God worked that way with Joseph he is the same yesterday, today, and forever,

and he is operating the same way with us today and that God does continues to work with us. And loved ones we know that God does this because of the kind of person he is -- because he's done this in the past and because every time Satan operates in our lives God is immediately working out how to transform it. And that is the meaning of that verse that I think it would be good if you just look at -- and then I will promise not to trail you through too many more.

It's 1Corinthians 10:13. Because it makes it just very plain to us that God is never caught out but that he's always really one step ahead. "No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your strength, but with the temptation will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it." In other words, we know from God's own word that he'll never allow us to be beaten and destroyed by anything and that he'll only allow it to take place up to the point where we can bear it and immediately if that happens he will be working out a way of escape. So immediately Satan comes into our lives with some destruction or catastrophe, God we know is immediately beginning to show us a way out of it. That's what he means, he's beginning to provide a way of escape.

That's why it says in the Bible that God will not quench the flickering torch. He will not allow events to so come upon you that you are destroyed by them, that's you remember the power that he has over Satan. Loved ones it is not a dualism; it is not God fighting Satan and we're not sure who will win. It is God using even Satan's workings to strengthen us and test us and to draw us closer to himself. That's the meaning of that interview you remember at the beginning of the book of Job. You remember, Satan comes to God and God asks him, "Where have you been?" He says, "I have been roaming throughout the world." And God says, "What have you to say to me?" And Satan says, "Well look at that man Job." And God says, "Yeah look at him, he is a man that never rebels against me." And Satan says, "Yeah, that is because you have set a hedge round about him; he has all that he needs. He is prosperous and rich, he has a family, he is respected by his neighbors, that's why he respects you." And then God said, "Behold he is in your hands. Do whatever you want only don't take his life."

And if you look at the first chapter of Job loved ones this afternoon, you'll see that God has control of Satan, that the things that come about in your life are not happening without God's permission, God does not send them. But when Satan operates, God allows through his dear loving fingers only what you're able to bear and so everything that happens to you has been filtered through the loving hands of your own Father and the only reason he is letting them come through is because he himself is going to use that situation to draw you nearer to himself and that is what it means when we say, "God works together for good with those who love him." God is always doing that and so dear ones, that's why we can really do what the Bible says. You know, treat it as pure joy when you enter into various trials because for us they are not the terrible, wild, impersonal results of a hideous power of evil in this world. They are the events that our loving Father is allowing to come into our lives so that he may use them for good with us.

Now, just before taking a couple of examples, could I point out two truths about the way an ordinary father would deal with an ordinary son. An ordinary father would get his little boy up every morning early because he knows that the burden of self indulgence will be greater for the poor fellow to bear if he is allowed to continue in it in his life than the burden of self-discipline. In fact, the father knows that eventually the boy's control over his own body and being able to make his body do what he wants it to do will bring a certain exhilaration and satisfaction to him. So just one fact, the father sees deeper than the boy, do you see that? The father can see that though it appears bad to the boy at the time, he can see that further along the way it's going to turn into

the boy's good. So just in ordinary relationships here, often the father can see deeper than the son. He can see behind the event and can see the good that he's going to bring from it.

Secondly, the father has the boy bear all that he can possibly bear at that time, because the father knows it will produce all the greater strengths and discipline in the boy. And yet, when he sees the little guy beginning to crack under it, he'll pull back. And so it is important for us to see that at the very beginning of our Christian lives, the Father very often works everything very obviously and plainly for our good, because we're such poor little mites we need encouragement. And then as we grow bigger he begins to ask us to take longer journeys simply believing that the good is his good and he is judging it rightly. I know to us it appears bad yet he is making it good to us and working it good for us. So the second fact is that God himself will often deal with us according to our maturity or our immaturity.

Now, this can be seen in all the instances that we've had in our body. Brian Gibdel dived into the lake you remember in the summertime, struck the bottom of the lake and broke his neck. And you remember we started to pray for him because he was absolutely paralyzed. And, I don't know if his mum is here, but she was if you remember – well, there he is, he's sitting in the second row. That spoils my story. So he was lying in bed you know, and I remember your mum coming and saying, or it was Judy I think came and said, "Yeah, Brian he just lies there with tears running down his cheeks." He couldn't talk or do anything, absolutely paralyzed.

And you remember, his mum would come and she'd share and we'd pray and you remember how it worked, I mean you could tell it wasn't luck because she'd come and say, "he can't talk" and so we'd pray and he could talk. Then she'd come and say, if he could only lift his hand up like that, you know - and so you pray so he could move his hand and now there he is and he was hiking with his dad and all that kind of thing. Don't know if he is skiing yet, but okay. That's God working for good to them that love him. That's plain and obvious, that's very plain and very obvious to us all.

Now I don't know, is Chris Vork here? Maybe she isn't. No? I married Chris a year - two years ago. She's 22, she married Bob Vork. Bob is just a man's man in every ways, you know. A graduate of Bethel, artist and a comedian, and just a dear fellow. All those of you who know Bob's name know that. And we married - I think they married in Bethel Chapel. And, there they are you know, a handsome couple and life just opening up just beautiful before them. And, a year and a half ago, no eight months ago, Bob was teaching in Braham, up north and he and Chris were in the Volkswagen going along a country road late at night and saw these lights coming towards them on the wrong side of the road. I don't know that the driver was drunk but he certainly wasn't in control of the thing. Bob of course, pulled the old car right up into a ditch to try at least to save Chris. And, of course, the thing just plowed into them. Chris looked down at him and she knew he was dead at that moment. And, immediately, she seemed to have a complete confidence in that situation that God was going to work for good.

She had been very dependent on Bob and I suppose like many girls at the beginning, you know, our husband is everything to us, and it was with her. She was very dependent and very quiet – that's why I wonder if she is here and just keeping quiet. But, she is very quiet and very shy and very reluctant to take initiative on her own, but at that moment had a great assurance that God was working for good in this situation with her. And so she went into the other truck and prayed with the other guys who were trembling and shaking. I did the funeral and I know that she was just victorious throughout the whole thing.

Now some of you know the rest of the story because God has continued to work for good in her. From being shy and dependant on her husband, she came in you remember to the restaurant about five or six months ago and it was just magnificent. She was head waitress in the restaurant for the past four or five months and just has been a blessing in the place and moved the furniture that she and Bob had gathered together and moved it down here into an apartment and three weeks ago she came to me -- this shy dependent girl whom all of us should began to treat as a tragic young widow, right? Isn't that it? A tragic young widow that we weep with and we sorrow with. This dear daughter of God came to me three weeks ago and said, "Pastor, I really think God wants me to go to London." So tomorrow morning she will fly to London to begin to run the dining room in a restaurant.

And that's God working together for good with her. You say to me, "What about Bob?" Bob knew Jesus. Obviously the Father could have stopped the fellow running into him, but God knows that he has another world to populate and the Father knows what need he has for Bob in that world and what need he has for Chris in this world. And so God works for good in everything to those who love him, to those who really want to please him. But loved ones, do you see it brings about a totally different attitude to catastrophes. That's why you remember one sister back there one Sunday said, "My mother died of cancer." So here is Brian being healed but here is a mum dying of cancer. So here is Bob being killed in a car accident, but here is Chris coming out of it with joy and with victory. And so loved ones, the good is not always immediately obvious to us, but God does work for good with those of us who love him. who are called according to his purpose.

And so these situations that you're in -- would you stop looking down, would you stop treating them as if Satan is in control -- and would you begin to see that you have a loving Father who knows what's happening to you and has already a plan of deliverance for you. He's just waiting for you to find out from him what he wants you to do. And instead of sitting around and moping and cursing God and cursing your luck, would you look up to your dear Father and see that this verse is true, that God works together for good with those of us who love him and are called according to his purpose -- and that he does immediately the tragedy occurs.

Well, I pray that God will help you to see it because it just transforms life.
Would you just pray, loved ones.

Dear Father, we thank you for your clear word and by it we know that in everything God works for good with those who love him, who are called according to his purpose. And, we thank you Lord, that that is true and that that will be true this coming week for us in the little tragedies: in the dead battery, in the failure of the lights, right up to the major tragedies, the death of our loved ones, the loss of our jobs. Father we thank you, that you are saying to us, "Look up, look up, my hand is upon that situation and I have already planned a new way for you to operate and to go. Look up to me and see what I want you to do now and I am going to work this for good with you."

Lord thank you, thank you, thank you that you are doing it at this very moment in each one of our lives and all we have to do is look up and begin to live, begin to rejoice instead of sorrow. Thank you, Lord. Thank you that you cannot be beat and that Satan can never catch you unawares, thank you Lord. Now the grace of our Lord Jesus and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with each one of us now and evermore. Amen