

The Purpose of Providence

Romans 8:29a

Sermon Transcript by Rev. Ernest O'Neill

Please turn to Romans 8:29, and you see the way that verse runs, "For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the first-born among many brethren." Now all the eager theological beavers who are anxious for us to deal with those jaw breakers and heartbreakers -- foreknowledge and predestination -- have to be patient until next week because, I'd look us to look at the other parts of the verse this week and then try to deal with those massive words, if not massive concepts, of predestination and foreknowledge next Sunday. But let's look loved ones together at the rest of the Verse 29. And, I'd love to sing it but I couldn't be sure that I'd hit the right notes so I'll just say it, it was a song that was popular 15 years ago and it goes, "Que Sera, Sera, Whatever will be, will be. The future is not ours to see. Que Sera, Sera." And "que sera" in Spanish is "what is will be".

And that's the way that many of us think that God governs our lives. Many of us think, "Yeah, that's the way God governs our lives. Whatever will be, will be, the future's not ours to see. You can't do anything about it. God just makes things happen irrespective of our own wishes, irrespective of what we would like to happen. God just governs our lives the way he wants." And that loved ones is the normal interpretation that many of us place on the verse we studied last week, "All things work together for good to them that love God." Many of us interpret that verse as being the overwhelming dominating action of a divine puppeteer who just pulls the strings as he wants and makes things happen irrespective of us completely. And so we get the idea, "Yeah well, if it's going to happen it'll happen."

And really it is a belief in faith that is no different from the Muslim who says, "It was the will of Allah." It's exactly the same attitude. It's feeling that all things work together for good to them that love God. God just makes the thing happen. It'll turn out all right in the end. Just let's just put up with it and bear it.

It's the kind of attitude that I remember was very popular at a funeral in Ireland. You'd be talking about the person who had died and talking you know about why a person at such and such an age had died and as sure as anything somebody in that room could always be guaranteed to say, "Well I think just his time had come." And I don't know if you have heard that, but I certainly grew up with it, that it was an accepted belief that there was a kind of fate that governed our lives and it was something that we Christians expressed by "all things work together for good to them that love God" and you can't really do too much about it. Now of course loved ones, it is an absolute blasphemy. It's utter blasphemy. It's a complete contradiction of the meaning of the original Greek in Romans 8:28 which we studied last Sunday and is a complete contradiction of the revelation of our Maker that we get throughout the rest of the record of his dealings with the human race down through history. So it's completely wrong, it's just wrong. That is the not the way God deals with us.

And you remember that what we did was look at the Revised Standard Version translation of that Romans 8:28. And if you had your Bible open at that point you could look easily to Romans 8:28 and you see there that it runs, "We know that in everything God works for good with those who love him,

who are called according to his purpose.” God works for good with those who love him. God works and we work. God works with us. God wills a certain plan in your life today, he has a certain plan for this coming week for you. There isn't one of us here who is in a difficulty at this moment that God has not a plan for us to get us out of that difficulty. God wills that plan, then we perceive it and believe it, and that allows him to release his power to bring it about. That's what we saw last Sunday, that it's not that the things work together blindly irrespective of what we think or what we believe. But it is that God wills a certain plan for each one of us, a certain purpose in every situation and if we believe it, if we perceive it and believe it, then that releases him into being able to bring that plan about. And so it's God working with us for good. God works and we work. He plans and we believe. He wills and we trust him to bring it about. God works with us.

Now loved ones that's, that's pretty plain if you would look at the gospel of Luke. It's Luke 8:43, "And a woman who had had a flow of blood for twelve years and could not be healed by any one, came up behind him, and touched the fringe of his garment; and immediately her flow of blood ceased. And Jesus said, 'Who was it that touched me?' When all denied it, Peter said, 'Master, the multitudes surround you and press upon you!' But Jesus said, 'Someone touched me; for I perceive that power has gone forth from me.' And when the woman saw that she was not hidden, she came trembling, and falling down before him declared in the presence of all the people why she had touched him, and how she had been immediately healed. And he said to her, 'Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace.'"

So Jesus came to destroy the works of Satan. Every woman who is hemorrhaging, every man whose body is not working normally, Jesus has one intention in his mind and that is to get that body working right. That's what he came to do: to destroy the works of Satan, to destroy everything that happens to spoil and prevent our lives being the beautiful lives that God made them to be. Now Jesus wants to do that. But do you see that until we touch the hem of his garment, he cannot bring that about in our lives? It requires us to believe that God wants to do a certain thing in our lives and then he works with us for good to bring that about. And so without the woman's faith God could not have worked. Indeed you remember, he went to a village and he could do no mighty work there the Bible says, because of their unbelief. So actually, if you refuse to believe that God wants the best for your life, then you actually prevent him bringing that best about. You actually limit him because God will not act against his own will, but he cannot act apart from our wills.

And so really loved ones, the Father works as those weavers work who make the beautiful imported Indian carpets that you can buy for tremendous prices. Those weavers work carefully, manually. And then they get by error or mistake of some kind, the wrong color of thread into the weaving. And you may think that they would immediately pull that out. They don't. They leave it in there and they weave it into the original design so that the final result is a pattern that is far richer and deeper than the original design that they started with. And they actually take the thread that came in by error or mistake and they use it to make the final pattern better than it was originally intended to be. Now, the Father works like that with our lives. He works in that same way. Some incident comes into our lives that would utterly destroy them, the Father does not act as a massive puppeteer who can do just what he wants irrespective of us. But he tells us what he intends to make of that unexpected event. And then he weaves it into our life to make our life fulfill his original plan in an even deeper way than he could have done otherwise.

Now what that does require, of course, is a positive belief on our part that God is working that way. You see if you don't believe that God is working for good in your life and that every unforeseen event and every unexpected happening in your life is being taken by God the very moment

it occurs and is beginning to be worked into a new plan he has for you, then, of course, you prevent him from being able to bring that plan about. And so one essential of God working in us is the necessity that we ourselves believe that that's God's nature. His nature is to do that in our lives.

Now really loved ones the certainty that God is doing that in your life does not come, we said last Sunday, from hundreds of people telling you how it worked with them. It does not. A 100 people can tell you how they completely totaled out their car and how it turned out to be one of the best things that ever happened to them. And when you total out your car you still won't believe that's the best thing that ever happened to you. So it doesn't matter how many people tell you about ways in which God worked for good in them, that doesn't actually stir up faith in you. It may confirm what you already believe about your Creator, but it itself will not create faith. The only way to come to a certainty that your Maker is always working for your good is to see that that's the kind of person Jesus himself is.

Jesus wasn't a destroyer. He didn't come around and find a leper with leprosy and then try to hurt the leper or try to destroy him. Jesus himself was not a great destroyer. He was the kindest and the most helpful person that ever lived. Now he is the son of our Maker. Our Maker is like that. Everything you hear about our Father tells you that he is a person who is always trying to work good in situations. He is the one who always says, "Him that comes to me, I will in no ways cast out. Though your sins are as scarlet, they will be a white as snow." He is always the one that says, "Look at the lilies of the field, they toil not, neither do they reap. Yet Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these." The Father is always the one who says, "How much more - if a father gives bread to his son, how much more will I give good gifts to those of you who ask me."

Loved ones, when you study the way God has dealt with us human beings down through the years, you find out that his nature is always to help us. Always to work good out of evil, always to take something that is a catastrophe like Calvary and turn it into the greatest blessing the world has ever seen. That is the nature of our Maker. The nature of our Maker is not Eichmann. The nature of our maker is not Hitler. The nature of our maker is not Napoleon. The nature of our Maker is a loving kind Father who is always trying to find out how he can make your life more beautiful than it is at the moment, more fulfilling and more complete than it is at the moment. In other words, our Maker is always trying to work out what is best for us.

Now Shakespeare has a line that fits in right there and it runs "Aye, there's the rub," And that's it. What is best for us? Because that's where the whole thing falls apart with most of us. Because what is best for us, you can see is synonymous with the verse Romans 8:28. We know that in everything God works for good. What is best for us is for good. It's the good that God is trying to work. And the problem is that when I ask you the question, what is good for your life, you do not immediately answer with saintly assurance, "What God wants." But we miserable little flies answer, "What's good for me? Well, what's good for me now, well, I'd like radials [radial tires, which were an advance on normal tires], a pair of radials, that would be nice, especially this morning."

Or, "Well, I'd like one of those hot lather," I don't know why you would want hot lather but, "I'd would like one of those hot lather machines." Or, "New golf clubs." In other words, we always answer what is good for us is what in our opinion we judge would be best in our life at this present time. And, that's the way we answer. What is good for us? We usually answer what we think would help us most at this point in our lives.

And so loved ones, we with our miserable little minds are believing God for half a million different things that we think would improve our experience of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. And God all the time is looking from his angle, but he cannot bring about what he sees we need because we're busy believing for a half a million other things that are absolutely irrelevant and that we forget about after five years have passed. And so the problem with most of our experiences of God's providence, is disappointing and it is disappointing because we do not agree with God upon what is good for us. In fact, you and I will heartily disagree with him. And really that's where the whole problem lies.

God's idea of good for us is so different from our idea of good for us. Now loved ones, you could tie that back to the two illustrations we talked about, do you remember, that had taken place in the body [reference to the Campus Church body of Christ]. And we mentioned them last Sunday. You know in your heart that you don't have problems with Brian, back there, Brian's experience, Brian Gabriel. You know that you don't have too many difficulties with the good there. You remember Brian dived in off a dock, in the summertime, into Lake Minnetonka, struck his head on the bottom, broke his neck, and ended up completely paralyzed in a hospital here in the cities. Then you remember we began to pray. And as we prayed, each Sunday, so the prayer was answered. And so of four fellows that were utterly paralyzed, he alone, I presume it's still that way, Brian, he alone, is out this morning and is able to be at church, but is able to be on his feet. And we all of course answer, "That was great. God was working for good in that situation. And there's the good, there is Brian. He still has a brace on, but he's alive, he's active, the paralysis is gone." And we all immediately say, "Now that's the good. Now there we can see God was working for good." Because in that instance, the good, his health, is what we all judged he needed at that time and so we have no trouble with it.

Now I'd ask you to look at the other illustration. Do you remember, Chris Vork? And she is 22 now. So two years ago, just about this time of year, a number of us were present at her wedding. And I remember putting the questions to Bob and Chris to love each other in sickness and in health till death us do part. Then you remember eight months ago, Bob and Chris were driving down that country road in a Volkswagen, the truck was coming on the wrong side of the road, right head on collision, plowed right into them and Bob was killed instantly. Then you remember me sharing with you that Chris, who had been a very timid woman and had been very dependent on Bob was just given incredible grace by the Father so that she actually prayed with the other fellows in the truck who were shaking and trembling and she exhibited that kind of courage and confidence throughout the funeral. And then she began to come into the dining room of the restaurant here, and just transformed the place into a place of beauty and order. And now, last Monday, flew to London to do the same kind of thing in the restaurant in London.

But you know that as you listen you have more trouble with the good there. And indeed there would be some old skeptical hearts that would say, "Yeah, well, well she's a very courageous girl. Well, yeah, well I suppose, I mean, it's as good as it could be. And anyway it's the sensible thing for her, she ought to get away and get lost in her work and maybe that will help her forget that empty space beside her in her bed. That's probably, that's the wise thing to do." But don't you agree that there's a difference in our response? We kind of think, "Well yeah God works for good – well, well let's say he did the best he could under the circumstances." And yet, loved ones, that's not what it says. It says God worked for good in that situation. And I remember at Bob's funeral saying, "Did God cause this?" No, the sinful lack of love and care for others in the other driver -- that caused it. Could God have prevented it? Sure God could have prevented it. Certainly God could have prevented the accident. Why did God not prevent the accident? Because Bob knew Jesus

and the Father knows what his needs are in the new world that he's creating. And he knew that this was a time when he could use a work that Satan was bringing about to bring Bob into the new world at the right time. And he knew also that Chris herself would be a blessing as a result of this. But it wasn't just because it was good for Chris, or good for the body, or good for the restaurant, it was because it was good for Bob.

Loved ones the Father has more worlds than this pitiful little corner that we see. He has more worlds than this miserable, one of the smallest, of the planets. The Father has a beautiful new world that he's involved in peopling at this time. And God judges the good in the light of the needs of that world as well as in the light of the needs of this world. None of us enter that world by chance. Even though Satan may bring about the death, it is the Father who permits the death, to work its will in a person's life. And God works for good to them that love God.

In other words loved ones, God's good is really different from ours. God's good for us is not physical health and the continuation of our physical life. Loved ones that's the mistake we make. You know the saying, "Well, as long as you have your health that's everything." We are so dumb, aren't we? We have all these little clichés that are just dumb, and just utterly contradict the Maker. "Well as long as you have your health you're okay." Loved ones, that is not God's best for us. God is not up in heaven looking at us just wanting us, wanting us, wanting us to have our health above everything else in the world. Because he knows that sometime this old health is going to run out. So there's no point in making that the one true good in this life.

Now the evidence for that loved ones is 2 Corinthians 12:7. "And to keep me from being too elated by the abundance of revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan, to harass me, to keep me from being too elated. Three times I besought the Lord about this, that it should leave me." And it is reckoned that it was some kind of glaucoma or some kind of disease of the eyes. "Three times I besought the Lord about this, that it should leave me; but he said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.' I will all the more gladly boast of my weaknesses, that the power of Christ may rest upon me."

That's just one plain example of a person who was a child of God who found that the sickness continued. Now it didn't prevent him fulfilling the purposes God had for him, but loved ones it's obvious there that freedom from sickness, that health and continuity of physical life is not God's best for us. And we are wrong every time we judge God's actions in our lives thinking that that is God's greatest good. Sometimes it's God's greatest good, sometimes it's not God's greatest good. Nor, loved ones, is it right to think that God's greatest good is our personal, domestic, social and professional success.

Now, loved ones, you have to take that, all of it. God's greatest good for us is not our personal, domestic, social or professional success. And we are just like silly little babies sitting on the floor stamping the floor with our heels whenever we get mad because God has allowed us to lose our jobs. And we suddenly say, "Well he isn't working for my good now, obviously." Loved ones, God's greatest good is not our personal, social, domestic, professional success. Now the clear indication of that is in Job of course, Job Chapter 19. And it's the whole purpose of the Book of Job and loved ones it isn't a problem, it's a problem Book for those who are not prepared to accept God's judgment on things, but it's a beautiful plain setting forth of this truth that we're discussing this morning.

Job 19:13. Job you remember started with the boils and all the physical diseases and then God

continued to let Satan operate in his life. Job 19:13, "He has put my brethren far from me, and my acquaintances are wholly estranged from me." That's a social failure. "My kinsfolk and my close friends have failed me; the guests in my house have forgotten me; my maid servants count me as a stranger; I have become an alien in their eyes." The domestic failure. "I call to my servant, but he gives me no answer; I must beseech him with my mouth." The professional failure. "I am repulsive to my wife, loathsome to the sons of my own mother. Even young children despise me; when I rise they talk against me. All my intimate friends abhor me, and those whom I loved have turned against me. My bones cleave to my skin and to my flesh, and I have escaped by the skin of my teeth." Loved ones, God allowed Job to experience that to make it clear to all us human beings that God's greatest good is not our physical well being, it's not our health, it's not the continuation of this life. It's not our personal success, our domestic success, our social success, or our professional success. God's greatest good is in Romans 8:29.

Maybe you would just look at it, "For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the first-born among many brethren." That's the good. All things work together for good and the good is conformity to Jesus. In everything in your life and mine, God is working for good with us. That is to conform us to the image of his Son, that his Son might be the first-born among many brethren. God is trying to create a race of new people who will depend on him for everything and who will be satisfied with him alone. A race of people who will throw away the crutches of their social success, who will throw away the crutches of their friends and their families, who will do without the crutches of professional success or of a good reputation, who will be able to walk without physical good health and who will be satisfied with God only. Because until God finds a race of people like that, he is not free to give us all those good gifts as and when he desires.

Loved ones God is using the events that happen in your life and mine to make us like Jesus. And whenever you at last give up fighting and struggling for more shares, and for more reassurance in the stock market, whenever you stop making a successful professional career the be all and end all of your life, when you stop treasuring your health above everything else and when you at last agree with your Father, "Father I want to be like your son Jesus whatever it costs me." When you come to that point, loved ones, an incredible peace comes into your life. An unbelievable peace and of course a great peace in God's heart because at last he has got a little child who is not grabbing at his coat asking him for something. And he's got a little child who he knows will stay with him and trust him whatever happens. And therefore, he's got a little child whom he can use to give his gifts of life to his world. Loved ones, that's it. I would encourage your hearts today and all time, to pray your way through to that place. And I'd ask you, is your good the same as God's good in your life, or have you a controversy with God?

Let us pray. Father we thank you for making this verse so plain to us. That in everything you do work for good with us and that that good is only for those who love you who are called according to your purpose. And that purpose is that we might be conformed to the image of your son Jesus. And as he learned obedience through suffering so you have called us into the same experience. So Father, we thank you for Chris Vork's experience as we do for Brian Gabriel's. We thank you Father for Stan and Emma who are at home sick today. And most of all, our Father, we give you thanks for the particular events that have come into our lives, for the unforeseen and unexpected circumstances that we now find ourselves in and that we have regarded up to this time, our Father, as a nuisance and an inconvenience and an unjustified interruption in an otherwise happy life. Father, we thank you for these things. We know you didn't bring them but, Father, we know that even now, you are using them to make us like Jesus and Lord we want to learn in what way we are to become more like

him in this situation and, Father, we know that after that has happened, then you are free to add all the other things to us that are optional extras of your love and that we can do without anyway. Father, thank you. Amen.