

All Things – Even Gnats?
Romans 8:14-30

“All things work together for good to those who love God.” That’s what verse 28 says, but can Paul be serious? Does Paul have a grip on the real world, on our world, a world of pandemics and poverty, a world of riots and revolutions, a world of disappointments and dissatisfactions?

After all, in our world, many people look at the suffering in their lives, or in the lives of their loved ones, and decide not to believe in God, not to believe in the Bible, not to trust in Jesus Christ. They just don’t see how God could be all-powerful and all-loving and still allow such bad things to happen. All things work together for good? Nothing can separate us from God’s love? Yeah, right.

But lest we fall into the trap of cynicism or self-pity, we should remember that Paul had a pretty tough life too. After all, the Book of Acts tells us that when Paul became a Christian, his former enemies, the Christians, became his friends. But his former friends, the Pharisees, became his enemies. And Paul’s new enemies were the same folks who had conspired to put Jesus to death. So they saw nothing wrong with trying to kill Paul too.

So, when Paul became a Christian, he also became a target. At a town called Lystra, his enemies stoned him, throwing rocks at him until they thought he was dead. In Philippi, the men in charge of the city had Paul beaten with a rod and thrown into jail where his feet were fastened in stocks. In both cases, the very reason Paul suffered so greatly was precisely because he was a Christian. His faith in Christ is what led directly to his pain and suffering. And yet, he could somehow say that all things work together for good for those who are called according to God’s purpose.

How can this be? How could Paul insist that even terrible sufferings are somehow good for a Christian? And how can we use this passage to gain some perspective on the suffering that comes into all of our lives?

Well, the first thing Paul has to teach us is that our relationship with God helps us put our suffering into perspective. And that’s because, as he says in verse 18, our sufferings are nothing when compared to the glory of knowing and being known by God. Yes, our lives in this world are often difficult – sometimes they seem to be spiraling completely out of control. But the good news is that those who are in Christ Jesus belong to another reality at the same time. In fact, because those who are trusting in Jesus are actually adopted children of God, we have the hope that one day we will be recognized as such by the whole world, on the day that all our sufferings will come to an end.

Now, I know when times are tough it can be hard to believe all this. Many of us don’t feel particularly special or worthwhile or loved, especially when everything around us seems to be going wrong. But that’s why verse 24 calls us to hope – if we always felt confident and assured and protected, if we already had all the blessings of Heaven, if we could see and touch Jesus now, we wouldn’t need to hope in Him, or in His coming. If our lives were perfect right now, we wouldn’t need to trust in Christ, we wouldn’t need to have patience as we wait for Him.

But when God comes into our reality our sufferings aren’t just put into perspective. Our suffering also connects us in a more meaningful way with the rest of God’s creation.

How is that the case? Well, verse 22 tells us that the whole creation is waiting with eager longing for Jesus to return. And that's because the whole creation – all the plants, all the animals, everything God made good and perfect – all of it has been subjected to futility. In one way or another, the whole creation has been messed up because of the sin of man. And that means the whole creation will only be made new when Jesus comes back.

And so when we swat at swarms of biting gnats, when our picnic plans are ruined by thunderstorms, when hurricanes blow into the Gulf and ice storms blow in from Canada, when viruses become more virulent and deadly, spreading across the globe, we are moved to join our voices with those of every created thing, crying out to Jesus to come back and fix what we can't fix.

But we don't just share in the suffering of the natural world, do we? No, whenever we are sick or hurting, we draw closer to the experience of others who experience disease or injury. Whenever we are hungry or wet, we get a glimpse into the reality of poverty and homelessness. In short, our suffering doesn't just help us fix our eyes more completely on Heaven. Suffering can also open our eyes more fully to the tragedy that is this sinful, broken Earth, drawing our hearts closer to other people who suffer, many in ways that make our problems seem small by comparison.

But there's one more thing that suffering does for us – it activates Divine help for us. Every Christian knows that we need to pray more when we are in the hard times, the painful times. But it is precisely during those times that prayer is most difficult. For let's face it – it is so easy to blame God for our pain. It is so easy to lose hope when we've tried our best and things just haven't worked out.

But here's the good news: when we are at our weakest, when we are at the end of our rope, when we have exhausted all our resources, God is still at work in us. For verse 26 reminds us that when we don't know how to pray, when we don't even feel we have the strength to pray, the Holy Spirit, the very Spirit of God Who lives within all Christians prays for us, groaning out of the midst of our weakness and pain with a message too meaningful for merely human words to convey. And we know that those prayers will be heard, because God the Father is always listening to God the Holy Spirit, and because the Holy Spirit always prays for us in ways that are in accordance with God's Will.

But in the midst of our pain, how can we be sure that all of this is true? Because of what Paul tells us at the end of this passage – the same God Who allows suffering to come into our lives ordained even greater suffering for His Son. It is because Jesus suffered and died on the cross that all who trust in Him can be justified, declared righteous in God's sight. And so as we share in His sufferings, we not only draw closer to the rest of God's hurting people and closer to God's hurting world, we not only activate God's power to help us and heal us, we become more like Jesus. We become conformed to His image. And we can thus be sure of sharing in His glory when He returns.

So, this week you may have to go through some suffering, some disappointments. Maybe the weather will frustrate some of your plans. Maybe you'll feel overwhelmed as you just can't get everything done. Maybe you'll discover some new challenges, or you'll keep wrestling with some of those all-too-familiar problems that you just can't do anything about.

If so, let's remember what Paul has taught us: suffering can bring us great benefits. Suffering can increase our hope and patience. Suffering can make us even more eager for our final adoption as children of God. Suffering can make us look forward with greater anticipation to the glory to come.

Suffering can put us in closer fellowship with all creation as we long for Christ's return. Suffering can make us more dependent on God, bringing the Holy Spirit into a powerful ministry of prayer on our behalf. For it is when we suffer that we draw closest to the One Who has suffered so much for us.