

"Grace for Waiting"
Romans 8:26-28
Dr. Jerry Nelson

How involved is God in the day to day activities of your life?

I'm not asking how much are you aware of him; I'm asking to what extent is personally and actively working in all circumstances of your life?

It was about 15 years ago.

Ken had just begun attending our church but my first conversation with him was when he called me one evening.

Ken told me he was struggling and wanted to know if I would meet with him.

I set an appointment for a couple of days later and then prayed for him on the phone.

When he sat down in my office the next week, I had no idea of the story he was about to tell me.

Years earlier Ken had developed a serious drinking problem and it was ruining his life.

His family was in shambles, his ability to work was compromised, and he seemed helpless to control his habit.

Talking to a friend a couple of weeks earlier Ken was encouraged to attend Southern Gables and to call me.

The friend wrote my phone number on a piece of paper and handed it to Ken.

After that conversation, Ken laid the phone number on the table and forgot all about it.

Then two weeks later Ken hit bottom emotionally.

After years of struggle, failure, and the discouragement of his life, he had reached the conclusion that he couldn't go on.

Sometime earlier he had purchased a handgun.

That night he got it out and loaded it.

Earlier that evening he had purchased a bottle of alcohol.

He got the bottle and a glass and with the handgun he walked to the

table.

His intention was to drink himself into sufficient courage to commit suicide.

As he laid the gun on the table he noticed the piece of paper, with phone number, that he had laid their two weeks earlier.

Instead of picking up the glass, he picked up the phone and called me.

When I received his phone call that evening, I had no idea there were a bottle of alcohol and a loaded revolver both waiting to be used.

After we prayed, Ken threw the alcohol out and returned the pistol to its place.

- Was it “CHANCE” that had a friend give Ken my phone number weeks earlier?
- Was it chance that had Ken lay the phone number on the table instead of throwing it away?
- Was it chance that had Ken lay the gun by the piece of paper?
- Was it chance that had me immediately available to speak to Ken when he called?
- Was it “CHANCE” or was it God?

Is God personally active in your life?

When everything is going well in our lives, it is very easy for us to say, "God is good".

It is easy to believe that God is personally smiling down on us.

But what about when we encounter the truly hard times of life?

Are we then so certain that God is acting on our behalf?

I remember a young woman looking at me with tears filling her eyes as she said, "I don't know if I can stand it anymore."

In her case it was physical suffering - she was afraid that she'd finally crack and that she'd join Job's wife, desiring to finally curse God and die.

"I don't know if I can stand it anymore" is a statement that is made in the

minds of many Christians:

A wife in a painful marriage;

A child or young person after years of insecurity in a breaking or broken home;

Or a man or woman without work and losing confidence in him or herself.

The Christians in Rome, to whom the Apostle Paul was writing, apparently had had it very rough.

Their suffering like ours was not only because they were Christians but suffering by just being part of the human race.

Suffering job losses, physical illness, families that self-destruct, and the ever-present suffering that comes from being sinful people - deeply disappointed even in ourselves.

In the 8th chapter of Romans, Paul writes to encourage those Christians.

Romans 8:15-30 "For you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the Spirit of sonship. And by him we cry, "Abba, Father." ¹⁶ The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children. ¹⁷ Now if we are children, then we are heirs—heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory. ¹⁸ I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.

¹⁹ The creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed.

²⁰ For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope ²¹ that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God.

²² We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. ²³ Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. ²⁴ For in this hope we were saved. But hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what he already has? ²⁵ But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently. ²⁶ In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express. ²⁷ And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints in accordance with God's will. ²⁸ And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. ²⁹ For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. ³⁰ And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified.

- By grace through faith in Christ we have been adopted into God's family, we are his children (15-16).
- As God's children we are co-heirs with Christ of a future of experiencing and reflecting the glory of God (17).
- That future will be lived in resurrected bodies on the new earth (21).
- Because that is our certain future, we are called to wait patiently for it (25).

But waiting is not our strong suit.

Especially when the present overwhelms us.

These are Christians who look forward to that promised future but don't know how they can manage in the mean time.

And so in our text for today, we are told what God is doing right now that enables us live patiently and fruitfully.

Romans 8:26-28 "In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express.²⁷ And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints in accordance with God's will.²⁸ And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.

The phrase, "in the same way," is a word that can also be translated "so also," "likewise," or "similarly."

Not only, as we saw earlier, does God give us a certain hope of the future, but "so also," or "likewise," or "similarly," or "in the same way" he is helping us even now.

Remember the question with which I began? - Is God personally and actively involved in your life?

Paul says, "Let me tell you what God is doing in our lives RIGHT NOW!"

To help us think accurately about these verses. I want to look at them in two parts:

1. Our problem

2. God's provision

I. First, our problem:

Paul describes the problem in two ways:

Verse 26: "Our weakness

Verse 26: "We do not know what we ought to pray for"

First of all when Paul speaks of our weakness what does he have in mind?

The word "weakness" is the opposite of "strength" and refers to our inability.

I love the story Jim Dobson told years ago about his then three-year-old son Ryan.

Ryan was hanging helplessly off the back of a truck muttering to himself "Somebody help the boy - won't somebody help the boy?"

He recognized his inability, his weakness.

Spiritually speaking, we are little children in a strong man's world.

Eph 6 says "Our struggle is not against flesh and blood but against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil..."

And these forces are far superior to any of us, and all of us.

Martin Luther got it right in his famous hymn:

"This world with devils filled is threatening to undo us, were not the right Man on our side our striving would be losing."

But not only are we weak compared to forces outside of ourselves, we are also weak compared to forces within us.

Romans 7 strikes a chord with all of us - we recognize that we can't even control ourselves - we often seem powerless in the face of our sinful tendencies.

When attack comes, when the enemy strikes against our souls, when we face temptations, when severe difficulties come into our lives, the truth is we are weak.

Not only are we weak but also notice how Paul describes our particular weakness.

It's actually the second way Paul describes our problem:
 "We do not know what we ought to pray for"

Please notice it doesn't say we don't know "HOW" to pray but that we don't know WHAT to pray for.

Our weakness affects even our prayers.

How many times have you been in situations when you were totally perplexed not knowing what to pray for?

Life can be so confusing that we don't even know what to ask of God.

Or we are so discouraged that we don't even pray - just emotionally out of gas.

Maybe even sometimes afraid to pray because we don't know what God's will is.

And even when we do pray, our prayers need correcting to be what they ought to be.

We ask too often out of mixed motives, or worse, wrong motives.

James 4:3 "When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures."

Yes, we have a problem.

But oh God's gracious solution!

Notice in verse 26 it is stated in general terms as simply "The Spirit helps us..."

The word "help" means in the Bible just what it means to us: To take part in someone's burden, to take hold of something with someone.

They are carrying it and we come alongside and take hold of it with them. We share the weight, the burden, or the pain.

When our weakness and inability leaves us in jeopardy - the Spirit helps.

When I was very young I followed my brother to the swimming pool in the town nearest our farm. I was in the shallow part and he went to the deep end.

When I wanted to leave I went to the deep part to get him and one of the other boys pushed me in.

Just as my brother was running to dive into the water, out of the corner of his eye, he thought he saw me falling into the deep water. He swam to me and pulled me out - I could not yet swim.

That may be a homely illustration but it certainly describes weakness, inability and help.

When we are weak, when we are unable, the Spirit's promise is that he helps us.

So HOW does the Spirit help?

"The Spirit intercedes for us."

Again this word meant to the Romans what it means to us:

It means to ask on someone else's behalf.

To go in their place and make requests for them.

But there are very special aspects of this intercession.

First of all The Holy Spirit intercedes for us in a way "that words cannot express."

This doesn't mean a private language; it means no language.

It is not words of a peculiar kind but non-verbal communication between the Spirit and the Father.

Secondly, he "intercedes for us with groans..."

God, the Holy Spirit, is not a mechanical robot; He's not an unfeeling, spiritual machine.

He intercedes with "groans".

In his intercession for us - he feels what we feel.

In his book entitled "A Tearful Celebration", Dr. Jim Means, my predecessor at the church I served and now retired from Denver Seminary described the ordeal of his wife Norma's cancer.

"There is the vivid image of hospital corridor. A year and a half after the first surgery, the cancer had spread to the spine and Norma was having trouble walking because of the pain.

“One day when I was leaving her room she insisted on walking me part way to the elevator.

“After she turned to head back to her room I turned to see her leaning against the wall for support as she limped in agony back to that room.”

Jim writes, "I ached for her".

The Holy Spirit of God aches for us no less.

We hear God’s compassion in these examples:

- In Heb 4:15 We have a high priest who is able to “sympathize with our weaknesses.”
- In Luke 23:34 Jesus prayed, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.”
- We see his compassion again in Matthew 23:37 “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing.

It is in our weaknesses that the Holy Spirit of God tenderly, with groans, with sympathetic care, begins to intercede for us.

However, not only does the Holy Spirit tenderly intercede for us, but he also asks on our behalf for exactly what we need.

When you are in your weakness, when you are too far down emotionally to even know what to pray - Know this:

The Holy Spirit is praying for you - asking for exactly what you need.

Look at Verse 27: “And he (God the Father) who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints in accordance with God’s will.”

The God who knows even OUR thoughts and intentions surely knows the mind of his own Spirit.

Especially when you consider that the Spirit intercedes in ways wholly consistent with the will of God.

One commentator expressed it this way: “Our failure to know God’s will and consequent inability to petition God specifically and assuredly

is met by God's Spirit, who himself expresses to God those intercessory petitions that perfectly match the will of God." (Moo, NICNT, 526)

The Spirit of God, with immediate awareness of our situations, and with deep compassion, is personally interceding for us every day in the specific ways that fit God's will for us precisely.

And what is the result of that personal intervention by the Spirit of God?

Romans 8:28 "And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose."

We love that promise but what does it mean?

First of all what are the "all things?"

What this means is certainly the "sufferings" already spoken of earlier in the chapter, but also means every circumstance of life.

These are not just the good things or just the hard things, but everything.

The late English journalist, Malcolm Muggeridge wrote, "Contrary to what might be expected, I look back on experiences that at the time seemed especially desolating and painful, with particular satisfaction. Indeed, I can say with complete truthfulness that everything I have learned in my seventy-five years in this world, everything that has truly enhanced and enlightened my existence, has been through affliction and not through happiness, whether pursued or attained. In other words, if it ever were to be possible to eliminate affliction from our earthly existence by means of some drug or other medical mumbo jumbo . . . the result would not be to make life delectable, but to make it too banal or trivial to be endurable. This of course is what the cross [of Christ] signifies, and it is the cross more than anything else, that has called me inexorably to Christ. (Malcolm Muggeridge, *Homemade*, July, 1990)

Secondly, what or who is behind this outcome?

Is it chance or is it God?

If we read only the King James Version of the Bible we might think that it is just a natural outcome of all things working together.

KJV “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.”

While that is a perfectly acceptable translation, it is more helpful to see the NIV or NASB translations where it is more explicitly God who is making or causing all things to do what he intends.

NIV “And we know that in all things **God works** for the good

NASB “And we know that **God causes** all things to work together for good...

Thirdly, what is the “good: that God works through all things?

In all translations the idea is not that everything that happens is good, we know that is not true, but that God **uses** all things to bring good.

One man wrote, “All things work together for good for the saints because God presses them into His service. God uses every event of our lives for the express good of his people.” “Paul is not talking about some sort of general principle of the universe. You know, when our football coaches tell us it takes the hard times to make the good times, no pain, no gain; that’s not what Paul is saying. He is not saying, “You know, going through suffering makes you a better person.” It’s far grander than that. It’s far more purposeful. This is not just a mechanistic principle in the universe. This is a specific activity of the sovereign God on behalf of His children whom He has drawn into a saving relationship. By Max Forsyth_

<http://www.fpcjackson.org/resources/sermons/romans/romansvol3to4/28bRomans8.28to30.htm>

This is speaking to the issue of the providence of God.

“The providence of God is his completely holy, wise and powerful preserving and governing every creature and every action.” (Westminster Shorter Catechism in Modern English)

God’s promise is that he is right now using every circumstance of life to accomplish his good purposes.

Fourthly, before I illustrate this, I want you to notice that this promise is for specific people:

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**

“Oh, it will all work out in the end” is, for many people, baloney!

In the end, for many, it won't work out; Hebrews 5:27 “it is appointed unto men once to die, but after this the judgment:

The stupendous promise of Romans 8:28 is for God's people!

And who are God's people?

Remember the old negro spiritual “Going to Shout All Over God's Heaven?”

One line in it captures an important truth: “Ev'rybody talkin' 'bout Heav'n ain't goin' there.”

Not everyone who claims to be a Christian is a Christian.

Christians are those who have turned to Christ, and in trust and obedience desire him more than anything this life has to offer.

John Piper has grasped this well when he writes, “Love for God is *cherishing* God himself beyond his gifts. Love for God is *savoring* God himself beyond his gifts. Love for God is *valuing* God and *prizing* God and *revering* God and *admiring* God beyond his gifts. All these words are grasping for that essential response of the heart to the revelation of the glory of God, especially in Christ through the gospel. It is a glad reflex of the heart to all that God is for us in Christ.” Piper, “All things for Good”
Part 1

But our text further defines the person for whom this is a promise: It is those **“who have been called according to his purpose.”**

Verse 29 will help us understand this:

Romans 8:29 “For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son...”

God has brought us into a relationship with himself for the express purpose of experiencing and reflecting the glorious perfections of God.

The promise of Romans 8:28 is for all true Christians who do love God, though not yet perfectly, and who are called to be more like Jesus.

In the opening of the book of Exodus, Moses condenses 500 plus years of history into one short chapter to demonstrate what becomes so easily obscured by our shortsightedness.

- In Canaan, a much-loved son, Joseph, is separated from his father and sold to slave traders by his own brothers.
- Joseph's slavery turns to a privileged place in Egypt, then prison, and then privilege once again.
- A famine threatens the lives of his family back in Canaan.
- The family is saved by Joseph's position in Egypt
- Over a period of 400 years the now huge family's privileged place in Egypt turned to slavery,
- And then the cruelest future of all, the slaughter of their newborn sons.

But what was happening through it all?

God has been in charge all the time, working his plan for the salvation of the world.

The very river that was supposed to kill the Israelite babies became the river that floated their deliverer, Moses, right into the Pharaoh's own house.

And the rest is, as we say, "history."

But the Bible's purpose is far greater than simply chronicling people, places and events.

The Bible is salvation history.

We want all history to culminate in **us**.

We think all history is supposed to be working out for our desired goals.

We become self-obsessed and thus we think we are entitled to a certain kind of life.

We think life is about us and so we demand to understand why this happened or that happened.

- We all want to be Joseph who rose to prominence out of slavery.
- We want to be Moses who escaped drowning and got to live in the Pharaoh's wealth.
- We want to be Joshua who led the army of God into the Promised Land.

We don't want to be the slave who died in the quarries of Egypt, or the baby whose life was snuffed out in the river, or the

countless unnamed men and women who died in the desert and never got to the Promised Land.

But when I read Exodus, I come to understand that it is not about me, it is about God.

It is not God's role in my plan but my role in God's plan.

When Moses puts 500 years of history in front of me and then I add to that, what I know of the 3500 years since, I realize I am but a small part in God's salvation history.

- Is my role, 15 minutes of life before I'm drowned in the Nile?
- Is my role, suffering for a lifetime in the quarries of Egypt?
- Is my role, to be a John the Baptist or a Jim Elliott whose light shines brightly but is snuffed out before 30 years of age?
- Is my role to live long and prosperously?

What I learn is that God isn't part of my story, I'm part of his.

An evangelical church in town is still running billboard ads that state their purpose in this way: "Your Success is our Passion!"

No! A thousand times, no.

God's success is our passion!!

I want my eternity tied to God's success not to mine.

I suppose we could misunderstand this God-centered thinking and conclude that we are nothing or that we are mere pawns on a great chessboard controlled by God.

But what we see is that God is in control of every detail of life because of his love for us.

We tend to think of our lives (be they short or long) as the sum of it.

But God has our eternity in his glory in mind.

God sees far beyond the 15 minutes that someone might live, or the years of suffering someone else might experience.

God is controlling both the immediate circumstances and setting things up for the future.

Oh the matchless wisdom of a God who can work "all things together for good" including the welfare of his people forever.

Christian, you are not on your own.

God's Spirit, who knows your smallest and greatest needs, is interceding for you with requests that perfectly match God's good will for you.

And God is working in every detail of life to bring about his desired end for us his people.

I began with a story today that unfolded in a few weeks.

I reminded you of another from Exodus that unfolded over 500 years.

I could tell you other stories that demonstrate God's use of myriad circumstances over a long period of time to bring about a "good" end.

We love those stories, as well we should.

But we must also remember the stories of

John the Baptist who was beheaded,
the story of Jeremiah who died in exile,
of Peter who was crucified upside down,
and the faithful saints through the ages who live out their lives on earth in seeming obscurity, afflicted with all the miseries of this life BUT faithful to God.

As difficult as our lives may be or as incidental as they may seem, they are planned by a sovereign, benevolent God

We are the objects of his love but we must see that love from the perspective of eternity, not just from the perspective of our present circumstances.

God can be trusted, even through our present circumstances, to bring about what is ultimately good, even if we suffer and die before then.

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Linda Dillow - *Calm My Anxious Heart*

"We say we want more faith but really what we want is sight. Sight says I see that it's good for me, so God must have sent it. But, faith says God sent it so it must be good for me."

What is the “good” of Romans 8:28?

The Christian understands the word "good" in another sense. By "good," he understands *spiritual good*. "Ah!" saith he, "I do not call gold good, but I call faith good! I do not think it always for my good to increase in treasure, but I know it is good to grow in grace. I do not know that it is for my good that I should be respectable and walk in good society; but I know that it is for my good that I should walk humbly with my God. I do not know that it is for my good that my children should be about me, like olive branches round my table, but I know that it is for my good that I should flourish in the courts of my God, and that I should be the means of winning souls from going down into the pit. I am not certain that it is altogether for my good to have kind and generous friends, with whom I may hold fellowship; but I know that it is for my good that I should hold fellowship with Christ, that I should have communion with him, even though it should be in his sufferings. I know it is good for me that my faith, my love, my every grace should grow and increase, and that I should be conformed to the image of Jesus Christ my blessed Lord and Master." Well, Christian, thou hast got upon the meaning of the text, then. "All things work together," for that kind of good to God's people. "Well!" says one, "I don't think anything of that, then." No, perhaps thou dost not; it is not very likely swine should ever lift their heads from their troughs to think aught of stars. I do not much wonder that thou shouldst despise spiritual good, for thou art yet "in the gall of bitterness and the bonds of iniquity;" a stranger to spiritual things, and let thy despising of spiritual things teach thee that thou art not spiritual, and therefore thou canst not understand the spiritual, because it must be spiritually discerned. To the Christian, however, the highest good he can receive on earth is to grow in grace. "There!" he says, "I had rather be a bankrupt in business than I would be a bankrupt in grace; let my fortune be decreased—better that, than that I should backslide; there! let thy waves and thy billows roll over me—better an ocean of trouble than a drop of sin, I would rather have thy rod a thousand times upon my shoulders, O my God, than I would once put out my hand to touch that which is forbidden, or allow my foot to run in the way of gainsayers." The highest good a Christian has here is good spiritual.

Spurgeon, October 18, 1857 "The True Christian's Blessedness"

<http://www.biblebb.com/files/spurgeon/0159.htm>