

FROM FATALISM TO FAITH

January 17, 1960

"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."—Romans 8:28

There is scarcely a person listening to me now who has a general knowledge of the Bible but that in some moment of crisis has not accepted the situation by quoting 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." It is intended to be an expression of faith, but in reality is a submission to fate. It tends to remove the element of free human agency and to leave the entire matter to the outworking of circumstances. This is to take a superficial view of life and its problems, something which Paul never did.

So we shall do well to spend a few moments examining this verse along with those which immediately follow. Therefore, let us consider, first, the promise; second, the purpose; third, the program.

First, note the promise. The King James Version reads, "And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God . . ." The word "know" renders a word meaning absolute or soul knowledge. Another Greek word commonly used in the New Testament basically means knowledge gained from experience. When that knowledge is so perceived as to become an absolute conviction of the soul, it is the kind of knowledge of which Paul speaks in this verse. In short, out of every experience we gain an experimental knowledge of events. But it is not until we learn to see through the immediate experience to the final result that the purpose of the whole becomes a conviction of the soul.

As we commonly read Romans 8:28—"all things work together for good"—this becomes the philosophy of fatalism. The word for "all things" is the subject

of the verb. It is a neuter form referring to impersonal events and forces. I submit that on the face of it this is not a statement which conforms to the facts as they are. "All things," if left to themselves, do not work together for good to those who love God. Earthquakes, famines, tornadoes, floods, persecution, heartaches, to name only a few, work together for evil, not good, even to those who love the Lord and who are trying to follow His will and purpose. During the Ohio River flood of 1937 the muddy waters not only invaded whiskey distilleries. They overflowed into a little church whose members at great sacrifice had just redecorated and re-carpeted its auditorium and installed a new pipe organ. The building with all of its lovely equipment was ruined.

Now I am not for one second suggesting that there is error in God's Word. But I am saying that there is a better text which runs true to all the facts of man's experience. Two of our oldest Greek manuscripts, known as A and B, read "Now we know absolutely that to the ones loving God, God works together all things unto good . . ." This is quite a different matter. It is not an expression of fatalism but of faith. Paul is saying, "No matter what happens to those loving God, God works in the experience to bring good out of it." But there is even more involved in Paul's declaration. So

Second, consider the purpose. Paul says that the above is true only to those "who are the called according to his purpose." For the moment let us focus attention on the word "purpose." This translates a word derived from a verb meaning "to place before." It is used in Ephesians 3:11 of God's "eternal purpose which he purposed in Christ Jesus our Lord." This was God's purpose of redemption for the human race.

Now you see that this promise of God cannot be claimed on just any basis. It does not refer to selfish personal matters, to material pursuits, or to anything which is outside of the will of God as expressed in His redemptive purpose. It is not a promise made to non-Christians. Nor does it apply to Christians who follow their own wills to the neglect of God's will. No Christian should take this to mean that he can do as he pleases, and somehow God will make it come out all right in the end. Not at all!

It is a promise that in the trials and uncertainties encountered by the Christian in carrying out God's redemptive purpose, God will work through these things to effect His will of good which is working through us.

Several years ago in London, England, it was my privilege to hear Doctor W. E. Sangster, one of the world's greatest Methodist preachers. His text was Genesis 24:27, "I being in the way, the Lord led me . . ." His theme was doing the will of God. One point of emphasis in his sermon was that we must be in "the way" before the Lord can lead us.

So before you can claim this promise you must be in the will of the Lord for your life. First of all, you must be a Christian. Then as a Christian your life must be blended with the will of God. In so doing you may expect to meet with untoward circumstances. At times it may seem that all the forces of life are aligned against you. In such you must not resign yourself to fate. Instead you must anchor your faith in God, knowing that you do not strive alone. Our Lord promised us to be with you always even unto the end of the age. At times it may seem that even when you pray the heavens seem as brass. Words fail you in attempts to frame your prayers, so that your prayer is nothing more than a groan. At such times remember Paul's words in Romans 8:26. "Likewise the Spirit also helpeth our infirmities: for we know not what we should pray for as we ought: but the Spirit itself maketh intercession

for us with groanings which cannot be uttered." Thus in prayer, as in all other matters, if we are called according to God's purpose, God works in all things for good for those who love Him. Now

Third, note the program. In Romans 8:29-30 Paul continues. "For whom he did foreknow, he also did predestinate to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brethren. Moreover whom he did predestinate, them he also called: and whom he called, them he also justified: and whom he justified, them he also glorified." This is one of the most controversial passages in the New Testament. Some see in it a type of foreknowledge and pre-destination on the part of God which amounts to little more than fatalism. But when seen in its proper light it simply expresses the program whereby God works in all things, even man's sin, to bring good to those who fit themselves into God's purpose of redemption. Let us examine briefly the key words in these verses.

"Foreknow" translates a word whose noun and verb forms are used seven times in the New Testament. Twice they refer to man as knowing beforehand on the basis of circumstances (Acts 26:5; II Pet. 3:17). Five times the reference is to God (Acts 2:23; Rom. 8:29; 11:2; I Pet. 1:2,20). In Acts 2:23 it is combined with the words "determinate counsel" which refer to the result of a council called for the administering of affairs of government. Thus a pre-determined course of action is set to meet a certain situation. It is in this sense that "foreknow" is used in our text. So it refers to a council in eternity of the Triune God wherein Christ was selected to die on the cross for man's sin. In I Peter 1:20 it is rendered "foreordained" in the sense that Jesus was foreordained before the foundation of the world to die for man's sin.

"Predestinate" means to mark out a boundary beforehand. Thus God marked out the boundary or condition within

which man should be saved. This condition is repentance toward God and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ (Acts 20:21). God's purpose was that man's inner nature and outward expression should be "conformed to the image of his Son." The word "conformed" renders a Greek word meaning the outward expression of an inward nature. The word "image" translates a word meaning a derived likeness such as the resemblance of a child to his parents. Thus through the new-birth you become a child of God through Jesus Christ (Heb. 2:13). Then through the process of sanctification you gradually become in your outward expression that which the Holy Spirit has worked in your inner nature through regeneration.

Within the boundaries of His redemptive plan God called all men. Those who answered He justified or declared righteous as though they had never sinned. Those whom God declared just, He also glorified. While "glorified" is an aorist tense, as are the other verbs in these verses, with the effect of a definite action of God in past time, it refers to a future realization.

Now applying these somewhat involved thoughts to you we find a very simple program. Knowing beforehand that you would be lost, God in eternity determined a course of action on your behalf. It involved His Son's death for your sin. He predestinated that if you would meet the condition of repentance toward God and

faith toward Jesus Christ, you would be saved. Then through growth in grace and knowledge you would be made like unto the exact likeness of Jesus. In that light He called you and all men. You who answer in faith He will declare righteous as though you had never sinned. Furthermore, He will sanctify you. Now sanctification is a threefold work. It is instantaneous in that the moment you are saved you are dedicated to God. It is a process whereby you grow more and more into the likeness of Jesus Christ. It is ultimate in that you will be glorified in Heaven. There you will become the full likeness of God's Son who is the exact image of His Father, that the Son might become the firstborn among many brethren. Thus we ourselves shall ultimately have the family likeness of sons of God.

Now this is what Paul means when he says that God works in all things for good to those who love God and fit themselves into the calling of His eternal redemptive purpose. So you are not in the hands of fate, but in the hands of a loving and purposeful God. Whatever happens to you, therefore, see it in the light of God's purpose. Trust in Him to work in and through you that in the fires of adversity He may fashion you according to His will. Then in the exhilarating waters of His grace let your likeness to sons of God be tempered that you may truly become likened to your elder Brother, even Christ, who is the exact image of God.

THE CONQUEST OF FEAR

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"What shall we then say to these things? If God be for us, who can be against us? — Romans 8:31

One of the most evident elements in modern life is fear. Alongside it is the desire for security. Tensions exist everywhere so that we live in constant fear of a war of utter annihilation. Fear expresses itself in the matter of daily bread,

so that elements within our society constantly war the one against the other. This sense of insecurity exacts its toll in the moral and physical realms. Our fears set us at war within ourselves so that in our unguarded moments every sort of evil invades our lives.

However, when you analyze the above-described situations we believe that you