

## Chapter 1

# WHAT WAS PAUL THINKING?

Because this entire book is based on the concept that God can bring good out of all things, let's begin by examining the basis for that theory from Paul's Letter to the Romans: "We know that in everything God works for good with those who love him, who are called according to his purpose" (8:28). This is one of the most comforting yet perplexing verses in all of scripture. Throughout this book, we will look at examples of this incredible assertion in action, but first let's look at the message itself, phrase by phrase. What exactly was Paul saying when he wrote these words to the Church in Rome some two thousand years ago? And how should we read them today?

"WE KNOW . . ."

Paul begins with the confident proclamation that what he's about to write is true. Before even considering the content of the verse, it's important to recognize the absolute certainty that prefaces what he is about to say. We all

know that the sky is blue and that cherries are red, but not everyone knows that God works in both the pleasant and unpleasant happenings of life. Despite all the adversity and suffering Paul faced, he knew this to be true.

Considering the importance of what he was about to say, I'm glad that Paul didn't open this verse with the words "we think" or "we hope," as that would have left an opening for doubt to creep in. There's no mistaking the mindset of someone who begins a statement with the words "we know." *We* might not know, but *he* does—all the more reason to pay attention to his words.

## "IN EVERYTHING . . ."

For a believer, it doesn't take much to see God's hand in the good things of life—a job promotion, good health, a new baby, financial gain, or a sunny day. He often gets credit, as he should, for bringing these things about. But while it's true that God is involved in all of life's pleasant happenings, he also has a hand in all of the not-so-pleasant things as well.

The same God who produces warm, sunny days is also responsible for days filled with clouds, rain, and wind. And, when you think about it, isn't that the way it should be? Otherwise, we'd be faced with the reality that God abandons us in times of trouble. He doesn't. In sunshine and in rain, he is always working to help us.

## “GOD WORKS FOR GOOD . . .”

The fact that God works in all things doesn't mean that all things are good. Such things as murder, adultery, or violence are not good. They are evil, and the fact that God can bring good out of them does not make them good.

Here's how the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* explains it: Even though God can bring good out of evil, evil itself is never a good (CCC, 331). To take the most dramatic example, the greatest evil was our rejection and murder of God's only Son. From that evil, God brought the greatest of goods—the Resurrection of Christ and our redemption. But even that reversal didn't change the evil of Christ's betrayal and death into something good in itself. Instead, God used the occasion of evil to bring forth good. The fact that not all things are good doesn't stop God from bringing good out of them. He can and he will, if we let him.

## “WITH THOSE WHO LOVE HIM . . .”

At some point we have to consider the ultimate “good” any of us could ever experience—eternal life in heaven. There is no greater good. When looking at Paul's proclamation, it's important to keep this in mind. There will be pain and suffering in life, but it's all designed to bring us our greatest good: union with God forever.

It is essential to remember that God allows us to participate in his plan. That's what Paul is getting at when he

singles out “those who love him.” Christian love is not a feeling, but rather a conscious decision. Yes, God can and will work good in our lives, but we can stop him from doing so. How? We do it mainly by refusing to acknowledge and obey him—in other words, by not loving him.

## “WHO ARE CALLED ACCORDING TO HIS PURPOSE”

We’re not always aware of it, but God has a plan for each of us. That plan is for us to enter into a relationship with him in this life and spend eternity with him in heaven. He arranges the circumstances in our lives to give us the best possible chance for that to happen. It’s not easy to accept, but that plan sometimes involves trials and suffering.

We are called by God. He loves us unconditionally and wants us to love him in return. In order to do that, however, we’ll have to accept some things that are difficult to accept. It will take work to get to the point where, like Paul, we’ll know for sure that everything that happens can draw us more deeply into God’s love. What better place to begin than by examining the life of the man who truly believed that God works in all things for good.

## WHO WAS PAUL?

In chapter 7 of the Acts of the Apostles, in the midst of the arrest and murder of a deacon named Stephen, we are first introduced to an unsavory individual by the name

of Saul. Not only did this young man consent to the brutal stoning of Stephen, but he entered multiple Christian households, dragging men and women into prison. It may seem unlikely to us, but this notorious persecutor of Christians would be the person handpicked by God to deliver the Gospel message to non-Jewish people. Better known by his Roman name of Paul, this persecutor-turned-apostle is the person responsible for the theme of this book.

As is often the case, it took some serious divine intervention to get Paul from point A to point B. As he was traveling on the road to Damascus to capture more Christians, Paul had a life-changing encounter with Jesus Christ. While scripture doesn't support the often-stated claim that he was knocked from his horse, Paul did experience something that turned his world upside down. After being questioned by Jesus ("Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" [Acts 9:4]), Paul was blinded and told to enter the city and wait for further instructions. He obeyed. This is the first example of God using adversity in Paul's life to accomplish great things, but it wouldn't be the last.

As detailed throughout the New Testament, Paul would go on to be shipwrecked, imprisoned, beaten, and rejected. Amazingly, he never let any of these struggles stop him from proclaiming the Gospel. If anything, he drew strength from his suffering and viewed it as a way to build character and share in the mission of Christ. Here's how Paul described his relationship to suffering:

## WHEN YOUR DAYS ARE DARK, GOD IS STILL GOOD

More than that, we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit which has been given to us. (Rom 5:3-5)

Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I complete what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church. (Col 1:24)

Ultimately, Paul's desire to serve Christ and be led by the Holy Spirit enabled him not only to accept suffering, but to rejoice in it. The trials he endured and the accompanying grace provided by the Lord eventually allowed Paul to see something we often miss: God can bring good out of suffering.

To me, this is the ultimate message of hope. More than anything else, I want to believe that God is in control of my life. Embracing this philosophy enables me to wake up each morning knowing that nothing happens by accident. Even when free will and poor choices cause "unfortunate" events to occur in my life, I want to take comfort in the fact that God is still in control. For that reason, I find a great deal of hope in the life of Paul and his assertion that God brings good out of all things if we let him.

Now, before you get discouraged and think that Paul is so far out of your league that you'll never be able to

trust God like he did, I have some good news for you. Even after his encounter with Jesus on the road to Damascus and his subsequent conversion, Paul knew what it was like to feel hopeless:

For we do not want you to be ignorant, brethren, of the affliction we experienced in Asia; for we were so utterly, unbearably crushed that we despaired of life itself. Why, we felt that we had received the sentence of death; but that was to make us rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead; he delivered us from so deadly a peril, and he will deliver us; on him we have set our hope that he will deliver us again. (2 Cor 1:8–10)

Although the details of this incident are vague, Paul makes it clear that he was in a bad place. Look closely at his overall message, however. Being on the verge of despair taught him to rely not on himself, but on God. Furthermore, the fact that God came through in this time of great suffering enabled Paul to face the future with confidence.

## LESSONS FROM ROMANS 8

It may take time, but you can begin to see suffering in a different way. In order to help you get started, let's take a brief look at some of the other points Paul made in chapter 8 of his Letter to the Romans.

## Life in the Spirit

Paul emphasizes the importance of living in the Spirit, not in the flesh. To set your mind on the Spirit brings life and peace. As taught by the Church and stated by Paul in Romans 8:9, the Spirit dwells in those who are baptized. And because the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of Christ, this gift of the Spirit can help us to see things from Christ's perspective. The world may see the bad in a situation, but Jesus can see the good. Therefore, the Spirit gives us the ability to see situations as Jesus did—through God's eyes.

## This Isn't Heaven

In Romans 8:18, Paul reminds us of something self-evident: there is suffering in this life. Any denial of that fact is simply not realistic. Paul takes some of the sting out of that admission by proclaiming that any suffering we experience in this life *isn't even worth comparing* to what awaits us in our heavenly home. In order to appreciate this fact, however, it's necessary for us to cultivate the virtue of hope. Doing so allows us to look past any suffering we encounter, recognize its temporary nature, and look forward to a day when suffering will be no more.

## Praying in the Spirit

In Romans 8:26, Paul acknowledges that sometimes we don't know what to pray for, especially when we encounter a difficult challenge or extreme suffering. When faced



with suffering, my first inclination is to pray that it goes away. While there's nothing wrong with doing that, there are times when the suffering remains and is drawing me to a greater good. I may not be able to see it, but the Holy Spirit does. That's when the Spirit can help us to pray for what we really need.

### God's Love in Action

As the eighth chapter of Paul's Letter to the Romans draws to a close, he leaves us with a piece of information that is woven throughout the pages of this book. Any suffering that we encounter in life can become an occasion for us to more deeply experience God's love for us. It's a difficult concept to accept, but one that goes a long way in reconciling suffering with God's love. No matter what we experience in life, God is expressing his love for us, in all circumstances we face:

Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? . . . No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Rom 8:35, 37–39)

In the chapters that follow, we'll look at people whose lives prove the truth of Paul's statement that "in everything God works for good." Undoubtedly, Paul was familiar with many or all of these stories, especially the ones documented in the Old Testament, so I don't think it's a stretch to conclude that his thinking may have been influenced by some of them. If they could influence him, they can have a similar effect on each one of us, too. God really can bring good out of any situation, but don't just take my word for it (or Paul's, for that matter). Let's look at some real-life examples.

### PRAYER

Dear Jesus, I could definitely use your help in understanding the value of suffering. So many things just don't make sense to me. Based on your experience in the garden of Gethsemane, I know you can relate. You weren't anxious to suffer, but you knew it was necessary. Thank you for giving me such a good example, but I'm going to ask for more. Please change my heart so that, like you, I desire nothing more than doing the will of the Father. Amen.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What situation in your life do you find the most difficult to see as an expression of God's love? Say a quick prayer to the Holy Spirit ("Come, Holy Spirit!"), and then try to think of any potential good that could come out of this situation.
2. Why do you think Paul was so confident about his belief that God can bring good out of any situation?
3. In your opinion, what is the key to finding peace in the difficulties of life? What is necessary to reconcile the idea of an all-loving and all-powerful God with tragedy and suffering?