

HOW TO DEAL WITH LIFE'S DISAPPOINTMENTS!

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Romans 8:28
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I. INTRODUCTION:

As we all know there are times in our lives when we experience disappointment. This state or feeling of dissatisfaction, failure, defeat, and/or frustration can be very painful, lingering, and become a source for all sorts of addictions, diversions, and vices.

If the disappointment is great enough, not only does mental/emotional stress find pertinent expression, but it can also break down a person's worldview. A worldview is the sum-total of one's beliefs about the world, the big picture that directs one's behavior and daily decisions. Like a computer's operating system, a person's worldview is the most important fact of a person.

In fact, as I teach philosophy in secular settings, desiring to know people's life stories, learning from them, and sharing what I've discovered about the God of the Bible, I've met people who, after having experienced such disappointment turn from one worldview to another. Some have moved from an atheistic worldview claiming there is no God to believing that God does in fact exist. Of course, I've also met the opposite. Life's disappointments can be so weighty that some who once believed in God now believe there is no God, there is no truth; there is no God out there who loves them. Then I've met those who turn to Eastern mysticism in an effort to rid themselves of disappointment. I suspect this too is disappointing because it is work based, dependent on one's efforts to shed all self in an effort to become one with the universe.

Regardless of one's worldview, dealing with disappointment can be difficult. One reason why disappointments can be hard to handle is that they can be wide-ranging and complicated intellectually, emotionally, and spiritually.

To be sure, disappointments can be related to regret or remorse. But one significant difference between disappointment and regret is that disappointment centers on the outcome itself whereas regret is the outcome that flows from specific poor decision-making. While disappointments occur as we live life, some disappointments can wreak havoc on us in the most intimate ways.

For example:

The long-standing dreams we pursued, hoped, and fought for with every ounce of energy, resource, and diligence, evaporates right before us like steam from hot cup of coffee. We try and try again with no luck. For some, this dream seems to forever evade us. We grieve in its wake!

For others, we have achieved our long-term goals. But what a disappointment! We worked so hard only to experience that the realization of this dream is so unsatisfying. Is this all there is?

Many of us are disappointed with our marriages. We had such high hopes when we committed ourselves to holy matrimony. The love and romance was so intoxicating! The future seemed so bright! But the years of grinding against each other, the failure to pursue oneness in the little decisions of daily living, the regrets from damaged words shared, and all the resultant pain has taken its toil on the one we committed before God to love. We look at other couples and they seem to be so happy... the flame of love alive and flourishing and we are nothing more than two ships passing by in the night. When we hear the words, "marriage," we utter a quiet exclamation under our breath something like, "What a disappointment!"

For some, the disappointment is not with our life's dream or our marriages, but with our children. Where have we gone wrong? We loved them, cared for them, and offered our very best to them but they reject what we have done and what we embrace for foolishness, reckless living, and the pursuit of worldly

illusions and entrapments. They are so strong-willed! Traveling along a path of foolishness, scorning biblical wisdom and hard lessons we have learned, they make choices that are extracting the best from them; we are left to pick up the pieces they left behind with a broken heart. We love them with everything we are yet they have disappointed us greatly.

For others, we are faced with some disease, some terrible or slow debilitation, or some horrific tragedy. We never saw it coming! It was out of our control! We genuinely feel the pain for those with whom this occurred, but we never thought it would happen to us. And lo and behold, it has! We wake up with no energy, so desperately wishing God would change our circumstances. Yet, each day seems to be like the day before. We endure with no reprieve in sight. Then when someone is snatched from us that we know, love, and hold dear, we exclaim, "Why God?"

What are we to do as believers in Jesus Christ when we find ourselves in a state of disappointment? To be sure, just because we know God does not mean that we are spared disappointments. According to James 1, we are to count it all joy when we experience trials. Disappointments can certainly be a trial that squash us hard. When these experiences of disappointment come about many of us find comfort, hope, and enablement to press on no matter the circumstance given the promise found in Romans 8:28 by the Apostle Paul:

"And we know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called to his purpose,..."

What does this promise from Romans 8:28 actually mean? How are we to appropriately apply it? This message is titled, "How to Deal with Life's Disappointments. Hopefully as we engage this verse, we will come away with some applicable benefits no matter how tough our disappointments become.

But in order to better understand this coveted promise, perhaps the one promise that *might* be more abused than any other in the New Testament, we must first examine it in light of its context. Context matters and this passage is definitely no exception to that principle of interpretation.

II. EXPOSITION OF ROMANS 8:28:

Paul is arguing in Romans 8 that we are to live by the power of the indwelling ministry of Holy Spirit. Thus, the central focus in Romans 8 is the power of the Holy Spirit in the life of the believer. This claim is totally affirmed in Romans 8:1-17. Then in Romans 8:18-27 Paul states:

¹⁸For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us. ¹⁹For the earnest expectation of the creation eagerly waits for the revealing of the sons of God. ²⁰For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of Him who subjected it in hope; ²¹because the creation itself also will be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God. ²²For we know that the whole creation groans and labors with birth pangs together until now. ²³Not only that, but we also who have the first fruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, eagerly waiting for the adoption, the redemption of our body. ²⁴For we were saved in this hope, but hope that is seen is not hope; for why does one still hope for what he sees? ²⁵But if we hope for what we do not see, we eagerly wait for it with perseverance. ²⁶Likewise the Spirit also helps in our weaknesses. For we do not know what we should pray for as we ought, but the Spirit Himself makes intercession for us^[a] with groanings which cannot be uttered.

What we observe in the immediate context, from Romans 8:17 to verse 28, is that our suffering in this present life are so slight, so temporary given the backdrop of eternity we will experience with our glorious God. In verses 24-25 we have hope, expecting

God to one day come back and set all creation right in view of what historically took place by Adam and Eve in Eden when they disobeyed God by abusing their free will (Romans 5:12) in view of the Serpent's dialogue with Eve (Genesis 3).

But in addition to the hope of Christ's return (Revelation 19), we also have the Holy Spirit to assist us in view of our ignorance in not knowing how to specifically and most effectively pray given certain circumstances in this present dispensation (cf. Matthew 6:9-15; Luke 11:2-4). In essence, the Holy Spirit assists us by interceding on our behalf before the Father (cf. Eph. 6:18).

Dr. Tom Constable's illustration on how the Holy Spirit intercedes for us in view of our ignorance is very helpful:

Imagine a loving parent seeking to help a child with a speech problem or hearing impairment. As the youngster struggles to express his feelings and desires, the parent imparts knowledge, and with his own lips, carefully tries to formulate what the child wants to say. This is a picture of how the Holy Spirit catches up our deepest longings and aspirations, and brings them in line with the Father's ultimate purposes for us.¹

Then in verse 27 we can take great comfort in knowing that our God understands and exchanges our ignorance and inability to rightly pray about a situation for what is right and appropriate according to God's will.

Now let's take a moment and consider the person who is writing these words. The Apostle Paul experienced a quite a bit of suffering himself as a believer. He was beaten and persecuted! He experienced imprisonments! He had more than one near death experience! So, in light of his discussion of all these sufferings and how they are not worthy to be compared with the glory which will be revealed in us, Paul asserts in verse 28:

¹ Tom Constable, Expository Notes on Romans," Romans 8:26. Retrieved on 4.12.2014. www.soniclight.com.

And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose (NKJV).

In order to rightly understand this beautiful and powerful promise, we need to explore at least six questions. Once we answer these six questions we will be in a better position to appropriately apply this popular promise.

First, how should we translate the first half of Romans 8:28? Should we translate vs. 28 as "***God is working in and through all things for good***" or "***all things work together for good?***" See, if you compare ancient manuscripts on this verse you will discover that there exists a textual variant for some will include "God" as the subject and whereas others will not. Either way, it does not matter because God is implied in the context. This is affirmed in the remaining verse, 29, 30, and all the way to verse 39. Paul affirms a very high view of God's sovereignty. Sovereignty is the infinite perfection of God whereby He unconditionally rules over all cosmos with unqualified freedom, omniscience, and omnipotence.²

More importantly, some might interpret Paul's claim to say that God is claiming nothing more than a "Pollyanna" mindset to history, namely, that all things will work out in a positive way. Don't worry! It will all work out! God will somehow take all the negative vibes we experience and convert them into positive ones in this life. Just think positive! As a result of setting up this "straw man fallacy," they might conclude that Paul's Pollyanna view of our circumstances is naive. Indeed, it would be naïve of Paul if that is his argument!

But Paul is not interpreting life's disappointments, problems, and trials from a Pollyanna mindset.³ As evidenced in verses 29-30. Nowhere does it suggest God converts the negative into

² A.W. Tozer, *Knowledge of the Holy*, 169.

³ <https://bible.org/article/do-all-things-really-work-together-good-romans-828-its-context>. Retrieval date: 4/12/2014. Dr. Dan Wallace, "Do All Things Really Work Together for the Good? Romans 8:28 in its Context (24 June 2004).

positive experiences as some type of health, wealth gospel whereby God has called you to be healthy and wealthy. Did not Paul claim in Romans 8:17 that we share in Christ's suffering and in Romans 8:18 that we are "suffering in the present." Did he not say in Romans 8:22 that the "*the whole creation groans and labors with birth pangs together until now*"? Paul also writes in Romans 8:23 that "*even we ourselves groan within ourselves for the adoption, the redemption of our body.*" We eagerly hope for His return because of these frailties, persecutions, and pains.

But in order to answer the question, how should we translate the phrase, "*And we know all things work together for good*" we need to ask a **second** question, namely, **what does the phrase "all things" include?** While the immediate context favors "*sufferings of the present time,*" we can certainly see how everything, namely, the good, bad, and ugly, can fit under the phrase "all things" for "*all things*" imply everything.

Third, what does the main verb, "work together" mean? In essence, God, who is the sum-total of His infinite perfections, takes all things and arranges them in such a way for our good. All things in of themselves do not have that type of enablement. But God, in His perfect sovereignty, takes good things, bad things, beautiful things, and ugly things we experience and weaves them together for our benefit unto His glory. Once again, God is not converting the bad into good, but using them as they are for our benefit in a very sovereign way.

When we've encountered certain disappointments, such as a wayward child, what do we do? We go to our knees. We change as a result of our interaction with God in prayer. Prayer changes us!

When we've been faced with an illness that keeps us from fulfilling some of the items on our bucket list, what do we do? We learn what it is like to trust God; we are able to see Him in the midst of our pain.

When we've encountered or participated in a terrible tragedy God is able to take something and turn it around where our eyes

open to spiritual truths for the first time. We are finally able to exchange our pride and self-serving ways with a burden to share the good news of Jesus Christ because we recognize how vaporous our lives are. We've been touched by God's grace and want to share our stories about how He redeemed us from ourselves.

When our goals are not realized, it may cause to reflect upon where we are, what the needs are around us, or even motivate us to recommit with greater vigor and dependency upon God where He has placed is in the present. Many of us focus on the future with such acuity that we fail to see the riches "in the now." But when our dreams are not realized some of us begin to take in the God-given blessings that we have previously failed to observe.

To be sure, God is not the Author or Creator of evil. Rather, God's sovereignty is displayed powerfully in that He is able to take what is evil and arrange it our benefit. N.T. scholar John Murray offers some great insight into this phrase. He writes:

Many of the things comprised are evil in themselves and it is the marvel of God's wisdom and grace that they, when taken in concert with the whole, are made to work for God. Not one detail works ultimately for evil for the people of God; in the end only good will be their lot. 'To them that are called according to purpose' is a further definition of those to whom this assurance belongs.⁴

Fourth, what is the "good" that God is working all things toward? Ultimately, the "good" is conformity unto Christ. We see this in verse 29 where Paul writes, "*to be conformed to the image of His Son.*" Since Jesus is God, we have to remember that God Himself is infinitely good; He is the Second Person of the One and Only Triune God.

See, the "good" cannot be arbitrary as if God says "*chocolate is good,*" and thus, because God said it, "*chocolate is now good.*" Moreover, the "good" can't be something apart from God for that

⁴ John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 314.

would make God dependent upon what is “good,” a property that would exist outside of God. Rather, the “good” is what flows from God’s own Person; goodness is an infinite perfection that properly belongs to Him.

In his classic work, *The Knowledge of the Holy*, A.W. Tozer describes God’s goodness this way:

When Christian theology says that God is good, it’s not the same as saying that he is righteous or holy....

The goodness of God is that which disposes Him to be kind, cordial, benevolent, and full of good will toward men. He is tenderhearted and of quick sympathy, and His unfailing attitude toward all moral beings is open, frank, and friendly. By His nature He is inclined to bestow blessedness and He takes holy pleasure in the happiness of His people.

That God is good is taught or implied on every page of the Bible and must be received as an article of faith as impregnable as the throne of God. It is a foundation stone for all sound thought about God and is necessary for moral sanity. To allow that God could be other than good is to deny the validity of all thought and end in the negation of every moral judgment. If God is not good, then there can be no distinction between kindness and cruelty, and heaven can be hell and hell, heaven.⁵

Tozer goes on to say:

Divine goodness, as one of God’s attributes, is self-caused, infinite, perfect, and eternal. Since God is immutable He never varies in the intensity of His loving-kindness. He has never been kinder than He now is, nor will He ever be less kind. He is no respecter of persons but makes His sun to shine on the evil as well as on the good, and sends His rain on the just and the unjust. He cause of His goodness

⁵ A.W. Tozer, *Knowledge of the Holy*, 127-8.

is in Himself; the recipients of His goodness are all His beneficiaries without merit and without recompense.⁶

Further, Christ, who is the image of the invisible God, is heir to all things (Romans 8:17; Phil. 2:5-11). We are in Him and He is in us (John 15).

But we should not be so quick to say the “good” only points to perfect glorification or ultimate conformity to Christ. We should consider how the things we experience in this physical earthly life are used to contribute to our conformity to Christ. Consider the words of N.T. scholar Douglas Moo:

While, however, Paul’s focus is on this completion of our salvation, we should probably include in the word those ‘good’ things in this life that contribute to that final salvation and sustain us on the path to that salvation. Certainly Paul does not mean that the evil experienced by believers in this life will always be reversed, turned into ‘good.’ For many things that we suffer will contribute to our ‘good’ only by refining our faith and strengthening our hope. In any chase, we must be careful to define ‘good’ in God’s terms, not ours.⁷

Moo adds this statement:

The idea that this verse promises the believer material wealth or physical well-being, for instance, betrays a typically Western perversion of ‘good’ into an exclusively material interpretation. God may well use trials in those areas to produce what he considers a much higher ‘good’: a stronger faith, a more certain hope (cf. 5:3-4).⁸

So, the “good” is whatever God believes is in our best interest to ultimately conform us to Christ. N.T. Scholar R. C. H. Lenski states it this way, “*This includes every kind of painful experience in*

⁶ Ibid., 128-9.

⁷ Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 527.

⁸ Ibid., 527-8.

Christian lives, all those that press groans from our lips and make us groan inwardly in unuttered and unutterable distress.”⁹ No doubt Paul would include the following powers, authorities, positions, and creatures when he says:

38 For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor heavenly rulers, nor things that are present, nor things to come, nor powers,³⁹ nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

It is so remarkable how God takes evil actions and is able to use them to bring about our conformity to Christ.

Fifth: To whom is God working all things out? Nowhere is Paul giving this promise of goodness to every person. No, God is working all things to those who love God. This evidenced by the phrase, *“to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose.”* The word, *“purpose”* is *“the act of setting something before oneself.”*¹⁰ God has a purpose in the ones He has called out. That purpose, once again, is ultimately, conformity to Christ. This is applicable to believers and not believers. People who don’t believe in Christ cannot conform to Christ until they come to saving faith.

And Sixth: Does this mean that as long as you love God, things will work out for your best interest but whenever you “are not loving God,” things will not work out for your good?

Dr. Dan Wallace insights are very helpful here. He observes:

Ultimately, all things work together to bring each Christian into conformity to Christ, to bring each Christian to glory. So certain is Paul that this will take place that he speaks of our glorification in the past tense! He uses what is called the “proleptic aorist,” a device in Greek when an author is indicating that ‘it’s as good as

⁹ R. C. H. Lenski, *Commentary on the New Testament: Romans*, 551.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 554.

done.’ Not only this, but no one is lost between predestination and glorification. Paul does not say “some of those” or even “most of those” when describing each stage of the salvation journey. From predestination to glorification, he uses the simple ‘those’ (οὗτοι or τούτους); the repeated pronoun refers back to the entire group mentioned before. *No one* misses the boat along the way.¹¹

So, what we receive in goodness is not based on how much we love God in a given season or even a particular moment in our lives as believers, but on what Jesus has done on our behalf. So, when *“we are not loving God”* as we should as believers in Christ, He still has our best interests at heart. He even takes those lapses, those poor judgments, and rebellious acts, and in His gracious sovereignty weaves all unto our eventual conformity to Christ. Now once again, that does not mean that he converts evil into good. Rather, the consequences that flow from the weight of sin can prod us or even break us to pursue God, to worship Him more fully with thanksgiving for the grace we have received. In spite of all He knew about us, He still died on the cross for our sins and rose bodily from the dead, and loves us perfectly.

But what we do realize is that we as believers are to “love God.” This is a truth replete in the Hebrew Bible (e.g., Deuteronomy 6:4-5) and reaffirmed by Jesus Christ whereby we as believers are commanded to love Him from out of whole heart, mind, soul, and strength (e.g., Mark 12:28-34). Interestingly, this is the only verse in Romans where Paul writes of believer’s love for God whereas elsewhere he speaks of God’s love for believers.

Because God is working out all things for our “good” as believers, we have all the more reason more to love Him. Our *“agape”* love for God finds expression through the Holy Spirit’s agency in our lives. As 1 John 4:19 states, *“We love, because He first loved us.”*

¹¹ <https://bible.org/article/do-all-things-really-work-together-good-romans-828-its-context>. Retrieval date: 4/12/2014. Dr. Dan Wallace, “Do All Things Really Work Together for the Good? Romans 8:28 in its Context (24 June 2004).”

III. HOW SHOULD WE THEN LIVE?

Since Paul is affirming the sovereignty of God, we take solace in this passage when our life circumstances do not become what *we* have dreamed, imagined, or even prepared. Thus, while life seems to oscillate between moments of stability and instability, what we discover is that God is weaving all things in our lives to grow us into conformity of Christ.

If you know Jesus Christ as your Savior, if you have placed your faith in Jesus Christ, believing that He is God, who died on the cross for your sins and rose bodily from the dead, then you know that God will never offer anything less to you than His infinite perfect best. Therefore, I would invite you as I invite myself to do the following:

When disappointment finds expression in your life such as when

- 1 Your dreams never materialize;
- 2 Your long-term goals constantly evade you;
3. Your greatest desires or wishes evaporate before your eyes;
4. Your expectations will forever be unrealized in your marriage and your children;
5. The success you have long sought is achieved and you discover that is an empty promise; the grass is not greener;
6. A new location has not brought forth what you were looking for;
7. A new degree has not promoted you;
8. A new job has given you more stress;
9. That new baby is unexpectedly conceived and you don't know how you will make it all work out given finances or even age;

10. Your friends hurt you;
11. When a tragedy finds expression in your life, whether for a moment, season, or the remainder of your earthly life;
12. When something or someone you care about is unexpectedly taking away from you.

... You can see them as disappointments or you can see them as tools that are designed in His loving wisdom to grow you and other believers into the conformity of Christ.

See, so much of our disappointment with life's circumstances is attitude. You were not designed to spend your existence on earth pursuing your dreams but to spend eternity with God who has your best interests at heart.

Thus, # 1, adjust the way you see life's disappointments! *But don't merely adjust the way you see life's disappointments.* # 2: *Exchange your attitude for an eternal outlook.*

Drop your daily planner, New Year resolutions, and bucket list and take up His priorities; get involved in what He is doing. If you will live for God, two things will follow and both are related. First, you will live for Him, and second, you will live for Him *wherever you are*. In other words, you will be maximized for His glory wherever He has planted you! As a result,

1. Your disappointments with this life will be exchanged for an enduring hope;
2. Your sufferings will be seen by you as temporary;
3. Your marriage and friendships can experience wholesome healing;
4. Your children will see a godly example of right living;
5. Your circle of influence will be blessed by your witness even when you suffer.
6. You will no longer live for your losses;

7. You will no longer for your successes;
8. Your short-lived dreams will be replaced with an eternal and ever growing vision of God;
9. Your God will never disappoint you for your intimacy with Him will forever deepen;
10. Your resolve to obey God will be one not merely out of obligation, but out of joy because you know He is sovereign;
11. Your delight will not be on that which is vaporous, but on that which is timeless;
12. Your disappointments will give way to trusting God who you intimately know has your best interests at heart.

Don't try to separate yourself from life's disappointments. Exchange your attitude for an eternal outlook.. But don't merely exchange your attitude for an eternal outlook; # 3. You must be in intimacy with Christ in moment-by-moment living.

See, changing our attitude about disappointments by exchanging it for an eternal outlook can only be made possible when we are in intimate fellowship with God. See, if you try to change the way you look at disappointments in your own strength or if you seek to wrestle with life's disappointments apart from a dynamic intimacy with Christ, you will not only find exhaustion and weariness, but perhaps even bitterness and disillusionment.

See in that intimacy, you can give God your disappointments, casting them unto Him no matter how difficult or arduous they are. Don't try to separate yourself from life's disappointment; give them to Him who loves you infinitely. When Paul's prayer request to remove that thorn of affliction was not answered as he prayed, did Paul soak himself in disappointment (2 Corinthians 12:7-10)? No. He worshipped God in light of Jesus' response when He said to Paul, "My grace is sufficient for you!" What you will discover is that while those disappointments you

experience can be fraught with burdens, sadness, and tears, you do not have to bear them alone. God offers intimate companionship! Once again, do not separate yourself from your disappointments. Do not run away from them! Walk through them with your Savior, your God, and your Sovereign King. He can carry your disappointments! Pray, beseech Him! Be dependent upon Him! Allow Him to live through your life. Love Him from out of your whole heart, soul, mind, and strength!

So, in summary, do not merely adjust the way you see life's disappointments; exchange your attitude for an eternal outlook. But don't merely exchange your attitude for an eternal outlook; walk in dynamic intimacy with God; He can carry these disappointments for you.

IV. FINAL THOUGHT:

In conclusion, I take it that there is a relationship between your disappointments in life's circumstances and your love-relationship with God. If your disappointments are controlling your attitude, your outlook, and even your actions, then I suspect those expectations may have occupied more of your affections than they should have. We are so prone to idols and those idols can even be certain dreams, goals, and expectations we have in our marriages, our children, and given situations. Some of those dreams may even have been planted in you by people who were well-meaning. But if you will really seek to love God from out of our whole heart, soul, mind, and strength, then you will enjoy the promise of this verse *no matter what* circumstance comes your way.

Therefore, where are you in your love-relationship with God? Your honest answer to that question will say a lot about you, but it will also say a lot about what you believe about Him.

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