

What Saith the Scripture?

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All Things for Good to Those that Love God- No. 1

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Lecture I

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Text.--Rom. 8:28: "For we know that all things work together for good to them that love God."

In illustrating the subject presented in these words, I shall,

I. Show what the passage means.

II. Illustrate the manner in which this is accomplished.

III. Notice some particulars as illustrations of this truth.

IV. Show how we know this truth, as the text affirms that we do.

I. The most important question pertaining to our first topic of remark is, Does the text affirm a universal proposition?

- 1. The language of the text is universal. It affirms in an unqualified manner that all things work together for good to God's friends. Now it is a good rule of interpretation to understand scripture as it reads, that is, according to its most obvious sense,--unless the nature of the affirmation, or some circumstances pertaining to it seem urgently to demand a modification of this meaning. All sound-minded men follow this rule in interpreting both the Bible and all other books and documents.
- 2. There is nothing in the nature of the case to limit the meaning of this language. On this point especially there is ample room to enlarge very greatly--but my time will not permit.
- 3. There is nothing in the context which demands any limitation, but much on the contrary which favors the universal construction.

- 4. There is nothing anywhere in scripture that conflicts with this, understood as a universal truth. On the contrary the Bible throughout teaches us that every thing in the whole plan of God's universal government conspires to this result. All is adapted to befriend his people and to promote their highest good. God is evermore controlling all things for the good of his children. He is their great and good Father.

II. The manner in which this result is accomplished.

This point deserves special consideration, because there are many things, affecting true Christians, which in their present operation seem to work together for their evil and not for their good.

It would require many sermons to investigate this subject thoroughly. At present I can only sketch a few leading principles.

The highest well-being of moral agents depends upon their holiness. This is perfectly obvious. Their holiness, moreover, is conditioned upon knowledge. There can be no holiness in intelligent being without knowledge, and holiness can advance only as knowledge advances. In fact, holiness is nothing else but conformity of heart to knowledge, so that of course there must be knowledge or there could not be holiness. Hence knowledge is both the condition and measure of holiness.

Consequently every thing that is a means of knowledge is also a means of holiness. Whatever gives moral agents a knowledge of themselves will if they are holy in character increase their holiness, for they would cease to be holy if they did not use their knowledge to increase their holiness.

Now all events that occur are providential;--that is, they occur under the universal government of God, and occur as they do either because the hand of God controls and shapes them, or because his wisdom permits them to occur as they do, rather than interpose to prevent them. Hence all events reveal God. No event can possibly occur which shall not teach moral agents something concerning God, or themselves, or something useful that they need to know. These events also teach us very much that reveals our relations to God, and hence our duties towards him. And these are precisely the things that are requisite to augment the blessedness of intelligent moral agents.

These remarks apply especially to all those events that fall directly within the range of our present knowledge. But things not within our present knowledge are so related to things that are, as to have a remote bearing upon us, and hence will ultimately come to be known to us. It is probably not too much to presume that all events that ever did or ever shall occur in this world will ultimately be known to all the people of God, and hence will have an important bearing upon their holiness and highest well-being.

III. I am to specify some particulars which serve to illustrate the doctrine of our text.

- 1. What we call mercies work out the good of those that love God. For if men love God, these mercies quicken their love and gratitude. Every real Christian knows this. It is a precious part of his daily experience.

- 2. What we call rebukes have also the same tendency to good. Though they may seem evil, yet are they really among the good things that flow to us from the hand of our great Father. They serve to increase our knowledge of God. They show us his faithfulness and assure us that his heart is thoroughly set upon correcting all in us that is wrong--and strengthening all that is right.

The rebukes of God's providence naturally serve to increase our virtue, and hence are often among the very best things God can give us.

- 3. Again, the crosses of saints work together for their good. Those very things that disappoint their plans, and frustrate their schemes are often among the indispensable things for their real and highest welfare. They are the means by which God breaks them off from their own ways and shows them that they must not have any ways of their own at all. While men are in a state in which they can be crossed, they of course need more discipline. You may recollect the remark made by Dr. Payson that since he had given up his own will and quite lost it so as to have no will of his own, he had not known a single disappointment. He was perfectly satisfied with every thing just as God arranged and ordered it, for he had no other will than God's. Now God is seeking to produce such a state of mind in his children that they will say--"I want only to do this or that according to the will of God. Nothing pleases me except what pleases Him. I want to learn His will before I have any special preference of my own. Then if His apparent will changes, I am perfectly pleased, for His will is always best."

Now this state of mind should extend to all events wherein the special will of God is not known by revelation. Hence crosses are exceedingly well calculated for doing good to God's people and are most kindly and wisely designed for this end. We are not to suppose that it is agreeable to our Father to perplex and distress us; but it is agreeable to Him to discipline and chasten us, because he knows that the results are so precious.

It often happens that persons come to see the truth of this in their own case. Then they say, "Now I see how well it has been for me to be disappointed, and how good and wise my Heavenly Father has been in doing it." When I have seen men eagerly set upon some earthly good, I have said to myself, "They need to be disappointed, and God will doubtless do it." I shall think it strange if He does not. If they are real Christians and God loves and cares for them as his children, He will surely bring them under discipline to break off their hold upon the world and save their souls.

- 4. Afflictions should doubtless be accounted among our good things. The Bible teaches this in many passages. One says, "Before I was afflicted I went astray; but now have I kept thy word." Another testifies-- "I know that in faithfulness thou hast afflicted me." Afflictions therefore are not to be regarded as evidences of peculiarly great guilt in those who experience them. The case of Job seems to have been designed to teach us this lesson. They rather evince the special faithfulness of God. "Whom the Lord loveth He chasteneth."
- 5. All those trials which we call temptations are to be accounted among these good things. They very often establish our virtue and greatly develop and strengthen our graces. For this manifestly they were intended. Hence the Apostle says, "My brethren, count it all joy when ye fall into divers temptations; knowing this, that the trying of your faith worketh

patience."--James 1:2-3.

- 6. The responsibilities which God throws upon His children are among the things that work for their good. We may perhaps be made to groan out under these things, and possibly stagger under their burden, yet shall they work out good at last. They are perhaps the very things that are needed to develop our powers. It may be that nothing less than these burdens would make us feel our need of God's daily support, and thus discipline us to daily dependence.

Moreover, some perhaps are naturally so sluggish that God could not save them if He should not lay upon them almost crushing responsibilities.

- 7. Our own infirmities work out our good. How often do we see this! Physical infirmities and frailties teach us our dependence upon God, and bring us to walk softly with Him and before Him. They often compel us to exercise sobriety, temperance and self-control, and in this way often become our greatest blessings.

Paul had a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan, sent to buffet him. What it was we are not told, but the result plainly shows that it was greatly useful to him.

Now all such things are in certain points of view greatly trying and painful, yet in other respects, they are exceedingly valuable. And when we shall ultimately come to see all their bearings, we shall see that Infinite Wisdom sent them, or at least permitted them, and then overrules them for our good.

- 8. Our very mistakes often work for our good. Said a pious man once who had fallen into a great error--"Now that is just like me" --that is just like me. I see it now. I might not have seen myself as I am, if that had not happened."
- 9. The same is doubtless true of the sins of those that love God. Peter's great sin in denying his Lord seems to have been greatly blessed--that is overruled so as to work out good to him. So with the sins of the children of God generally. Yet they have no excuse for themselves and are none the less guilty for committing them, because God is so good and wise as to counteract some of their evil tendencies and bring good out from them instead of unmingled evil.
- 10. The infirmities, mistakes and sins of others are among the things that work for our good. Who does not know how much we are benefited by witnessing the sins of others! No thanks indeed to them that their sins are a warning to us, nor can this circumstance lessen their guilt.

Also the afflictions of others often work out great good to us. The afflictions which we see others suffering may and often do have much the same beneficial result as if we endured them ourselves. So wonderfully has God framed the social economy of our nature and of society.

Finally, it is plain that all events that occur under the providence of God serve to promote the good of His people.

But we must hasten to enquire,

IV. How is it that we know this.

The Apostle says, "We know that all things work together for good to those that love God." Now we cannot suppose he meant to say merely that all inspired men know this. His meaning doubtless is that all Christians may know it. For,

(1.) Reason affirms that it must be so under the government of an infinitely wise and benevolent God. No one can take just views of the character of God without seeing that he must have had a plan for governing this world--must have foreseen all possible and actual results--and must have provided that nothing should occur in vain. That is, He must have determined to prevent the occurrence of all those events which He could not overrule for so much good as on the whole to justify Him in permitting their occurrence. These conclusions are either the direct affirmation of reason, or they are arrived at by the plainest inferences from its intuitions.

(2.) But it is a truth of revelation, and Christians may know it because the Bible teaches it. The Bible every where directly or indirectly teaches that God is overruling all events for the good of the righteous.

(3.) Experience and observation universally teach the same thing. Who does not know that all real Christians can say this. Looking over their past history, they can say-- "This and that--yea all these things, have been made, through divine mercy and wisdom, to work out my good and fit me for more usefulness here, or, at least for more glory hereafter." It is instructive to see how many of the saints of God can set up here their Ebenezer, and testify-- "Hitherto has the Lord helped me!"

REMARKS.

1. We may blame ourselves for that which upon the whole we do not regret. For example, a man may commit a sin, and of course, he is guilty and inexcusable for this, and ought most surely to blame himself for committing it. His intention is all wrong and he is entirely to blame for it. Yet on the whole it may not be a matter of regret that the sin viewed as an event, occurred, because God has brought a vast amount of good from it.

As a full illustration of this point, take the sin of Satan in tempting Judas and the sin of Judas in yielding to the temptation to betray Christ. This transaction in both Satan and Judas was all evil and nothing else but evil; and was none the less a sin and a great sin because the Lord overruled it for so much good. Yet this good result has been infinitely great. The event therefore is not to be regretted on the whole though Satan and Judas are none the less to be blamed because the wisdom and the love of God have brought so much good from their sins.

You will all recollect the view given in the Bible of the sin of Joseph's brethren in selling him into Egypt. "Be not grieved, said he, nor angry with yourselves that ye sent me hither, for God did send me before you to preserve life." They had sinned, but God had educed so much good from their sinful act,

that it was now fit that they should rejoice in those manifestations of wisdom and love.

2. God may blame us and often does, when perhaps on the whole He does not see cause to regret the occurrence of the event. Doubtless God blamed both Judas and Satan, yet He does not regret on the whole that great event towards which their sin directly contributed. Referring to this event, Peter said, "Him, being delivered by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God, ye have taken, and with wicked hands have crucified and slain." Their hands were none the less wicked for the good which the Lord brought forth as a result from their evil doing. And it surely may be that the event as a whole even, including the sins of Judas and of the wicked Jews, is not regretted by the Most High.

3. It does not follow from this that sin is the necessary means of the greatest good; or that God could not bring about a still greater good if all his creatures were perfectly obedient. It cannot be shown that in every instance where sin occurs, more good results than would have resulted if holiness had been in its stead. Indeed we cannot conceive of any higher blessedness to the created universe than universal holiness and its consequent happiness. Now if in every instance when sin occurs, holiness under the same circumstances had occurred, the result would of course be universal holiness, and a degree of blessedness, than which we can conceive of none higher. But it is not my intention now to enter at length into this often disputed subject.

I am aware that those who maintain that sin is the necessary means of the greatest good argue thus;--all holiness depends upon knowledge of God; many truths respecting the character of God could never have been revealed if sin had not occurred; hence sin is necessary to the greatest amount of holiness and consequently of real good.

This reasoning would have weight if the case were such that creatures could not be holy without such knowledge of God as nothing can reveal but the occurrence of sin. But none can suppose that such can be the case of moral agents under the government of God. The argument therefore only shows that, sin having occurred, the Lord makes the wisest possible use of it--a fact which none can reasonably doubt. It altogether fails to prove that the state of the universe is better now than it would have been if all had persevered in holiness under the light they had.

But it is especially to my purpose to maintain that God's overruling all things for good to his people forms no apology or excuse for sin. No thanks to the guilty sinner that a God of infinite wisdom can and does manage to work good out of his intended evil. No thanks to him;--he is altogether evil and wicked. He does not use it for good himself, nor mean it for good, no more than the devil did in the case of Judas, or than Judas himself did. Suppose that Christ's death, and his death in precisely that manner, was the very best thing that could have occurred;--no thanks to Judas or Satan for that; they meant only evil, and all the resulting good must be ascribed to God alone.

Hence it does not follow that we should do evil that good may come. In fact, it is in the nature of the case impossible that a man should do evil for the sake of its resulting good. It is impossible that a man should sin for the sake of doing good thereby, and with this design. Suppose a man to say--let me sin on now for this is the way to do good! Pause a moment and ask--What is sin? Surely it is not doing anything with the design of bringing about good; no but, sin is mere selfishness--is always a trampling down of the greater good for the sake of a far less good for myself. Sin, therefore, never can have the

greatest good for its object. Every act that has the greatest good for its design, object or motive, is holiness, not sin.

I am fully aware that the doctrine of my text has been greatly abused. Men have said, "Because sin results in good, therefore let us sin on, and leave it with God to bring out the good which he needs sin in order to educe." But this is an outrageous perversion of this precious truth. The fact that God can overrule sin for good affords not the least mitigation of the guilt of any sinner. Every sinner is just as guilty as if all sin tended to evil only and as if God had no power or disposition to bring any good out of it whatever.

4. It often happens that we are unable to see how the providence of God will result in our ultimate good. Events that affect us or our friends look utterly dark and we seem almost compelled to say with Jacob, "All these things are against me." All this must be evil to me and mine, and cannot work out my good. But in such cases we are bound as believing children to dismiss the views which sight gives us, and fall back upon faith. We must now believe God, who says "All things shall work together for good to those that love me." Let all my children believe that and trust their own kind Father!

Now it is not wonderful that in a world like this, framed for a state of trial, events should often assume such an aspect as this. It results in the trial of our faith. And here apply those most pertinent and consoling words of Jesus Christ-- "What I do, thou knowest not now, but thou shalt know hereafter." Howmuchsoever, then, the events of divine providence may make us smart, or throw us into perplexity,. still let us fall back upon the unfailing promise-- "All things shall work together for good to those that love God."

5. We see why we should give thanks for all things, and why every thing that occurs is, in reference to God and His agency in it, [a] matter of gratitude. We see why we should thank Him for every thing he brings about directly by his providence, and also for every thing He suffers to be done by moral agents, Himself not preventing them from doing it. We should thank God for not preventing the murderous deeds of Judas and of Satan; for He had wise and good ends in view in not preventing them. Under the circumstances, the Lord did the very best thing he could in permitting those wicked beings to go on, and consummate the murder of his own dear Son.

The same is true of every sin that occurs in the universe. So far as God has any thing to do with it, we thank Him, because He does all things well; always doing even in respect to sin the very best thing that under all the circumstances of the case, He can do. For this then, we thank Him. But for what sinners do, we cannot thank them, for they intend only evil. They are to be cursed--not thanked for their sins, and cursed none the less because God always overrules their sin to make it result in just as much incidental good as He can.

6. We see why it is that we are required to rejoice always. Why should not saints rejoice always in all that God is doing? Many of these things, I know, often seem for the present, not joyous but grievous, yet in their remote and ultimate bearings, they always work out great good, and the greatest good which under the circumstances God could effect. A man who is sick may need to resort to many unpleasant medicines; if maimed, he may need for his best good a painful surgical operations; and these things, though sad in many of their bearings, are yet good in their ultimate results, and therefore

it is cause of gratitude, when they are skilfully and successfully performed. So with many of the events of life. They come, unmingled with sorrow, but good in their ultimate result, and it would be a great mistake to estimate them only by their present evil, leaving out of view the greater resulting good.

7. It sometimes happens that persons are in this state; "I know," say they, "that 'all things work together for good to those that love God;' but I am thrown into such circumstances of perplexity and darkness that I cannot tell whether I am one of those who love God or not. The only emotions of which I am sensible are those of pain and agony. I am full of distress, and I can scarcely think of any thing else. Especially I cannot feel on any other subjects but my own trials and sufferings."

Now all such persons should look at the attitude of their will and not of their emotions. If they would do so, they would see through this mist, and their perplexities would no longer harass them.

How often have I seen individuals in great distress, under deep trials and perplexities; but strengthening themselves in the Lord their God, they came forth from those scenes of tempest as the sun breaks out from an ocean of storms, all the more glorious for the long and fearful hiding of his beams. So the tried and believing Christian comes forth from his sorest trials, having learned lessons concerning God unknown to him before. Now he sees that his trials are among the greatest blessings he ever received from the Lord.

8. What ever befalls the saints is to be rejoiced in. Trials may befall our friends,--perhaps our own children; but if we have evidence that they love God, we may rejoice in every thing that occurs to them. What if afflictions come--wave after wave; all things shall issue in their ultimate good;--this is as sure as the word and the government of the eternal God. Even if we should see such a case as that of Job--and none perhaps ever looked more dark--yet even in view of such a case we should rejoice; for we might know that in every similar case as in that, God prepares his afflicted child for a double blessing.

So also in the trial of Abraham's faith in the matter of offering up Isaac. In this case some things are developed, not often noticed--things pertinent to the case of some Christians at the present day. You recollect, God commanded him to go and take his own son and put him to death, and then offer him as a sacrifice on an altar. What! Abraham might naturally have said, "what! God command me to kill my own son? The devil might do this--but how can it be that God should do it? Surely I never heard any thing like this in the ways of God before! This contradicts every thing I have ever seen or heard of the Lord Jehovah! He commands me to commit one of the most horrid crimes that ever can be committed. And then this is my son of promise, and God has said that out of him he would make a great nation."

Surely this was one of the most severe trials. It threw Abraham upon his naked faith. He had no resource but to fall back upon simple trust in the Lord, and say, God has spoken--even the wise, the good, the just God, and now let me trust his name! He can raise my Isaac from the dead if need be in order to fulfill his promise.

Thus he stood his ground, and passed this great and fearful trial. O, how useful and blessed were the results of this trial to Abraham, during all his future life and through all his glorious existence. How

gloriously has this example of faith stood out before all the children of God from that day to this! How many have had their faith quickened, directed, edified, by this great example! And perhaps it is not too much to suppose that sooner or later all the angels of heaven will be blessed by the far-reaching influence of this example of trusting and obeying God.

It is a great mistake to overlook these future results of our trials. We ought ever to keep them full in our view. Doing so is indispensable in order to be able to rejoice continually in the Lord, and in all the events that occur under his all-pervading providence. If we fail to do so, how many things will disconcert us and make us stumble to the sore wounding of our peace with God and of our confidence in him.

In continuing this subject I shall show that the opposite to the doctrine of the text is true of the wicked; --all things shall work together for their evil.

GLOSSARY

of easily misunderstood terms as defined by Mr. Finney himself.

Compiled by Katie Stewart

1. **Complacency, or Esteem:** "Complacency, as a state of will or heart, is only benevolence modified by the consideration or relation of right character in the object of it. God, prophets, apostles, martyrs, and saints, in all ages, are as virtuous in their self-denying and untiring labours to save the wicked, as they are in their complacent love to the saints." *Systematic Theology (LECTURE VII)*. Also, "approbation of the character of its object. Complacency is due only to the good and holy." *Lectures to Professing Christians (LECTURE XII)*.
2. **Disinterested Benevolence:** "By disinterested benevolence I do not mean, that a person who is disinterested feels no interest in his object of pursuit, but that he seeks the happiness of others for its own sake, and not for the sake of its reaction on himself, in promoting his own happiness. He chooses to do good because he rejoices in the happiness of others, and desires their happiness for its own sake. God is purely and disinterestedly benevolent. He does not make His creatures happy for the sake of thereby promoting His own happiness, but because He loves their happiness and chooses it for its own sake. Not that He does not feel happy in promoting the happiness of His creatures, but that He does not do it for the sake of His own gratification." *Lectures to Professing Christians (LECTURE I)*.
3. **Divine Sovereignty:** "The sovereignty of God consists in the independence of his will, in consulting his own intelligence and discretion, in the selection of his end, and the means of accomplishing it. In other words, the sovereignty of God is nothing else than infinite benevolence directed by infinite knowledge." *Systematic Theology (LECTURE LXXVI)*.
4. **Election:** "That all of Adam's race, who are or ever will be saved, were from eternity chosen by God to eternal salvation, through the sanctification of their hearts by faith in Christ. In other words, they are chosen to salvation by means of sanctification. Their salvation is the end- their sanctification is a means. Both the end and the means are elected, appointed, chosen; the means as really as the end, and for the sake of the end." *Systematic Theology (LECTURE LXXIV)*.

5. **Entire Sanctification:** "Sanctification may be entire in two senses: (1.) In the sense of present, full obedience, or entire consecration to God; and, (2.) In the sense of continued, abiding consecration or obedience to God. Entire sanctification, when the terms are used in this sense, consists in being established, confirmed, preserved, continued in a state of sanctification or of entire consecration to God." *Systematic Theology (LECTURE LVIII)*.
6. **Moral Agency:** "Moral agency is universally a condition of moral obligation. The attributes of moral agency are intellect, sensibility, and free will." *Systematic Theology (LECTURE III)*.
7. **Moral Depravity:** "Moral depravity is the depravity of free-will, not of the faculty itself, but of its free action. It consists in a violation of moral law. Depravity of the will, as a faculty, is, or would be, physical, and not moral depravity. It would be depravity of substance, and not of free, responsible choice. Moral depravity is depravity of choice. It is a choice at variance with moral law, moral right. It is synonymous with sin or sinfulness. It is moral depravity, because it consists in a violation of moral law, and because it has moral character." *Systematic Theology (LECTURE XXXVIII)*.
8. **Human Reason:** "the intuitive faculty or function of the intellect... it is the faculty that intuits moral relations and affirms moral obligation to act in conformity with perceived moral relations." *Systematic Theology (LECTURE III)*.
9. **Retributive Justice:** "Retributive justice consists in treating every subject of government according to his character. It respects the intrinsic merit or demerit of each individual, and deals with him accordingly." *Systematic Theology (LECTURE XXXIV)*.
10. **Total Depravity:** "Moral depravity of the unregenerate is without any mixture of moral goodness or virtue, that while they remain unregenerate, they never in any instance, nor in any degree, exercise true love to God and to man." *Systematic Theology (LECTURE XXXVIII)*.
11. **Unbelief:** "the soul's withholding confidence from truth and the God of truth. The heart's rejection of evidence, and refusal to be influenced by it. The will in the attitude of opposition to truth perceived, or evidence presented." *Systematic Theology (LECTURE LV)*.

[Part 2](#)