

*Our Love Within God's Providential Love (Rom 8:28)*

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Introduction

The subject of suffering was introduced in Romans 8:17 and became the dominate concern of the rest of the chapter. Given the large contrast of chapter 7 with chapter 8, the suffering that Paul has in mind must include the fact of sin remaining in us, and given 8:10, it must include the suffering that is associated with dying and death. Therefore, the *suffering is comprehensive*; it is plural, sufferings are in view. From verse 18 to 39, *Paul gives three supports*, comforts or encouragements that put all of our sufferings into perspective and that enable us to endure them with confidence regarding the future. These are the magnitude of glory (18-25), the help of the Spirit (26-27), and the providence of God (28-39).

To review the first two for a moment, on one hand, we can remind ourselves that every sign of suffering in the entire world is a promise of the glory. It all waits for our glory as co-heirs with Christ (this is how Patricia and I have to focus her long illness: each cough, every ache are signs of promise). What magnitude of glory this must be if God subordinated the restoration of the entire creation to it. On the other hand, in the suffering now with all of our needs and all of our weaknesses, the Holy Spirit is our helper-intercessor who longs for our blessing and who thus intercedes for us personally, intensely, incomprehensibly (that is, picking up perfectly where our prayers leave off), and effectually.

These are great supports for us to meditate upon and absorb into our thoughts, perspectives, and worldviews. However, Paul's knowledge of the reality of suffering in all of its stark severity causes him to reach for another support. He moves from a perspective on the entire creation to a perspective on all our needs in relation to the perfect will of God, and then further yet to a perspective on history under God's providential care. The rest of the chapter can be outlined around the theme of providence, which is stated (v. 28), confirmed (vs. 29-30), and applied (vs. 31-39).

In this connection, I want to center attention on Romans 8:28 for a couple of weeks. This morning our topic is "Our love within God's providential love" based on the phrase "those who love him." This speaks about our love for God within the context of God's love for us. What I am looking for today is mostly contained in these questions: "What is the relationship between our love and God's providential love?" "Does man's love condition God's providence?" "I want to see what the relationship must be to preserve the full meaning of providence. Does it pollute providence if we mix in man's response of love? Do "all things" include our failures in loving God?

1A. God's providential love originates our love

Paul cites man's love for God, so how do we put the entire accent on God? Does this make providence a cooperative venture and not a God-centered one?

We maintain a God-centeredness in our thinking regarding our love for God if we keep **1 John 4:19** in mind: "we love because He first loved us." A few things in the passage point us in a God-centered direction. 1) Clearly, our love for God is due to His initiative: His love is first. If He does not come to us in saving love, we will never come back to Him from our waywardness and straying in the wilderness of this world outside of Eden. 2) But there is much more to 1 John 4:19. It not only speaks of God's initiative, but it speaks causally: we love Him *because* He first loved us. John says that His love for us *caused* us to love Him.

Some people try to dodge sufficient cause in 1 John 4:19. Even here, some propose a man-centeredness by thinking that the relation of God's love to our love is *a necessary cause but not a sufficient cause*. That is, they claim that for our love to come into being, it is required that God act in order to bring into realization something that is already present. In some way, they believe that we already have the ability to love, and God simply "ignites" it. God must take the initiative or we would never come to a place of being able to choose to love Him. The idea of a necessary cause goes with the notion of divine initiative. His action is first and must be first or we would never exercise love for Him. This view claims to be God-centered though it is actually man-centered.

Let us consider some things that are wrong with this view.

1) It removes cause from *because*. In other words, the distinction here between a necessary cause and a sufficient cause is merely a play on words. This view claims that] a necessary cause is simply the occasion of our coming to love God and *not a cause at all*. This necessary cause view leads to the following translation: "our love is occasioned by His love." It reduces to the thought that His love brought about the opportunity for us to love, but only the opportunity and not the love itself. His love brought about the circumstances needed to turn us to God with love, but it did not bring the love into existence. Again, this is not a cause. Instead, it is an occasion or a circumstance necessary but circumstantial not causal.

2) It affirms this *distinction* between types of causes (necessary vs. sufficient) on the *basis* that man in his fallen and natural state is able to turn back to God in obedience, faith, and love. *If man is able to love God then all he needs is the opportunity to exercise this ability*. In essence, the claim is that Gods love simply supplies the opportunity that we need to exercise our choice. However, does fallen man have this ability to chose to love God? John says of us in our natural state that it is "not that we loved God" (1 Jn. 4:10). Love does not arise in a void. In the Gospel of John, he says that in our natural state we "loved darkness instead of light" (Jn. 3:19) and we hate the light (we hate Christ, Jn. 3:20). Does it make sense to say that people who love darkness and hate God have the ability to love God?

Hatred of the light results in refusal to come to the light (Jn. 3:20), and it results in emphatic rejection of Christ (Jn. 1: 1-5, 10-11). The only way we can have the ability to love God and come to the light is by means of the divine birth from above. *This birth explains our receiving of Christ* (Jn. 1:12-13). We must read verse 13 as explaining how people who do not receive Him (v. 11), who do not recognize Him (v. 10), who in darkness do not understand Him (v. 5), who love darkness, hate the light and will not

come to the light (3:19-20). Verse 13 explains how people of this type actually receive Him by faith. They were born of God and thereby believed in His name and embraced the light.

What about John 3:16? Doesn't John 3:16 tell us that God loves all and therefore all must have this ability to love Him? In reply, we must first explain God's common love or common grace. In one sense, God loves all people everywhere. It is a general love that is common to both the just and the unjust. He sends them both the sunshine and the rain (Matt. 5:45), and He shows this kindness as a witness to Himself and for man's enjoyment (Acts 14:17, when a fallen sinner enjoys the weather, a sport, or good food, he has been gifted by God and ought to acknowledge God as his benefactor). However, giving people sunshine, rain, crops, and the joys of life does not save them. This love does not benefit anyone eternally. It does not bring about their salvation. The reason that God's common love is not saving love is that man suppresses the truth of his everyday experiences, which continually evidence God's existence and thus, His love. He knows God in every fact of God's world but He suppresses the truth in unrighteousness and is therefore without excuse (Rom. 1:18-20).

The love spoken of in John 3:16 is saving love. It is not the general love of God for all that has no saving efficacy. Instead, it is His particular love, which saves the world. The saving efficacy of this love comes out in the connection of John 3:17 with John 3:16. God's determined purpose to save the world defines His love for the world: He sent His son "to save the world through him" (v. 17). It is not God's desire that is expressed here (as in 2 Pet. 3:9). It is His purpose, His determination to save. Surely, it is easy to accept the fact that *what God determines to do will be done* when and where He pleases.

We must therefore acknowledge that the love God has for the world that will issue in the actual salvation of the world must guide us to the meaning of the term "world" in this context. It obviously cannot refer to every person "without exception" for then it would teach the salvation of everyone, which contradicts the clear biblical fact that many follow the broad way to destruction (Matt. 7:13). What does "world" refer to then if not to people "without exception"? There are different views on this but *at the least* it refers to people "without distinction" (which is very different from "without exception"). That is, the movement of the gospel from the OT to the NT was from a Jewish particularism to a national universalism, from the Jews to the whole world (Jn. 1:10, cf. Jn. 12:32 for an example of this concept though "world" is replaced, strikingly, by "all men"). *At the most*, world refers to the human family as an organic whole which will be saved even though many individuals will perish (cf. Jn. 12:32 with 1 Cor. 15:22a: all who make up the fallen human family in Adam died spiritually in the fall but in the second Adam, all in Christ, all who make up the new human family will live, 1 Cor. 15:47; 1 Cor. 15:22b).

Therefore John 3:16 does not teach that God's love merely gives man the opportunity to love Him in return if He so chooses. But it teaches that God's determined love actually issues in the salvation of those who are loved. There will be a new and redeemed human family, a saved world, because of God's love for the world.

Furthermore, John 3:16 does not support the idea that 1 John 4:19 teaches that God's love for us merely makes our love possible, furnishing the necessary opportunity. The point of

causality in 1 John 4:19 must be associated with the point of determined purpose in John 3:16: His love brings about the salvation of the world (Jew and Gentile as the new man, the new humanity in Christ) and His love brings our love into existence.

Therefore in Romans 8:28, our love does not relativize or condition God's providence. It is not "all things will work for our good on the condition that we love God." Instead, God by His providential care works love in us.

These general teachings support the connection of calling with love causally in Romans 8:28. Namely, the text immediately describes those who love God as those called by God to remind us of the origin of our love and to accent the work of God in fulfillment of His purpose; these reminders are there to assure us and support us in the time of our present sufferings.

What then is the point of the reference to loving God in Romans 8:28? It is this simple: the phrase "those who love him" identifies the persons to whom Romans 8:28 applies. It simply tells us that all things work together for good to those who have love in their hearts for God. How they came to have love for God is precisely discussed in passages like 1 John 4:19.

Thus Romans 8:28 does not apply to everyone in the world. It applies to those who belong to Christ, to those who have the Spirit, to those who love God, and thus, *to those who are Christians because of God's love*. God's providential care, in general, works all things for the good of those that love Him because of His providential care for them in particular.

## 2A. God's providential love upholds our love

Now what if someone claims to agree with this view of the origin of our love but he still sees providence as contingent upon our love? The text does say that good comes to those who love God. Does this mean that our love for God *as Christians*, our response to God in love, is the key that unlocks the door of providence? Does it mean that all good will come to us in every circumstance if we have sufficient love for God? This would mean that the promise would not hold for us if we do not have sufficient love. Lack of love in degree or sufficiency on our part is then something not included in the all things that work together for good. On this account, Romans 8:28 is a limited promise. It is then a promise limited by man's response. Note the difference between saying, "All things work for good" and "All things work for good except those things determined by man's responses"; or between "all things work for your good" and "all things except your lack of love work for your good." Let me state why this view is unacceptable.

Given the *context* of Romans 7 (and the battle with sin cited in Romans 8:13f), *our present sinfulness is part of the suffering of the present*. If Romans 8:28 does not include our weakness of love, our very sinfulness, our sins, and the painful consequences of our sins, then it is actually no support at all for us in our present sufferings. But the giving of support, comfort, and encouragement in the severe trials of the present is the point of Romans 8:18-39 with Romans 8:28 introducing the third support of three (the relative insignificance of suffering, 18-25; the help of the Spirit, 26-27; and the providence of

God, 28-39). The view that conditions the benefits of providence on the loving responses of man jerks Romans 8:28 from its context and destroys the comfort it offers.

In contrast to this emphasis on man in the doctrine of providence, we have to find our comfort not in ourselves but in God if we are going to find true comfort here in the first place. Thus, we have the following impact: the scope of God's love is such that it takes into it our love with all its weakness due to sin. His love is faithful though ours is frail.

*This instills gratitude*

Why is a theodicy (an explanation of the problem of evil) not the first step forward for the Christian? Why doesn't the Christian wring his hands trying to formulate a justification of God as he looks around and sees all the horrible suffering (creation inflicting it on creation, creation inflicting it on man, man inflicting it on creation, man inflicting it on man)? It is because the Christian has a true view of sin, of the fall, of the fallen world, and of his own sin. Therefore, what he needs as a sinner is not a justification *of God* but a justification *from God* (Warfield). He needs the gospel of Romans, the good news of a righteousness promised in the OT, secured by Christ, and given to sinners by undeserved and sovereign grace.

Because of this grace, the identification of those who love God applies to us, however frail our love may be. We love because He loved us. He upholds us in our love though it is weak. Therefore, we must be ever thankful!

*And this stirs up our love even more!*

Knowing His providential care with regard to the weakness of our love can only prompt us to love Him more in thought, word, and deed. Consider Watson's definition: love is a wholehearted and industrious affection for God as my king. He says we are to love God with our heads studying, our hands working, and our feet running in the way of His commandments. The fact that God upholds our love by His providential love, and our knowledge that this is the case (that He gives us in His word), stirs us up to love Him all the more.