

“Playthings of Fate”?

There is a view of life that says “We are just the sport of the grim and inscrutable President of the Universe”.¹ No doubt those who think that way would like to impeach that “President” if they could! “If there is a God” you can hear them say, “He just seems to play with us”, and so, “We are the playthings of fate and chance.”

In a sermon that first appeared in print in 1947 the late Rev. Clarence Edward Noble Macartney, who wrote more than forty books, speaks of another view of life. One that is greatly more comforting and assuring than that hopeless assertion I just mentioned.

Macartney, a Presbyterian minister in the United States turned to the words of the apostle Paul in his letter to the Romans, chapter 8. It is one of many places in Scripture that speaks of the hands of a wise and gracious God. A God and Savior who does not deal with his people as if they were no more than throwaways. He doesn’t abandon those once made in his image but desires them to live in close fellowship with Him. He has a vested interest in the lives of believers. He loves them and he so arranges and rules the events so that all things work together for our final good.

That’s what Paul said in verse 28 of Romans 8. In that pivotal chapter Paul first contrasts a life lived in surrender to one’s sinful human nature with life in the Spirit. He states this assurance to Christ’s church in Rome, (and we may say, to Christ’s faithful people today, that “*Those who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God*” (v. 14).

Paul does not deny that such Christians will suffer in this present life. Yet he insists that “*Our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us*” (v. 18) He realizes, as he says in v. 22 and following, that the whole creation has been “*groaning as in the pains of childbirth*” for a very long time. That’s because of God’s curse that we’ve spoken about a few weeks ago. A curse that came on this earth because of man’s rebellion against God.

Paul says that even he and all God’s children “*Groan inwardly*” even as they wait for their final deliverance, the day Christ Jesus returns to wipe away all tears

¹ A quote from Clarence E. Macartney in “All things Work Together for Good” a sermon in his The Greatest Texts of the Bible Kregel, GR. 1992, p. 59

from the eyes of his faithful and removes all causes of hunger and pain and death.

Because Paul knows this deliverance, or, as the bible calls it, “*final redemption*” is coming, he can comfort those believers in Rome, living in the capital of the harsh heathen empire of Rome with these very words:

And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love Him, who have been called according to His purpose v. 28.

“*In all things God works for the good...*” That covers a lot of territory! A territory full of comfort and hope. I know, there will be not a few sceptics who deny that this can ever be true. Others, look at the circumstances in the lives of sincere Christians and note the illnesses, the sudden death of loved ones and the persecution of those who only desire to live a God-fearing and peaceful life by terrorists and say, “*I wish, O how I wish that it were true..... but how can it be?*”

Yet Paul and his fellow believers are very sure. For he doesn't just speak for himself when he says, “*We know, we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love Him...*” He speaks that way more often in his letters. When he considers the reality of death in 2 Corinthians 5 he says again, “*We know*” ... “*Now we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, an eternal house in heaven, not built by human hands.*”

So you and I may also know, for God's Word doesn't lie, and the Holy Spirit doesn't pull the wool over our eyes. God does have the whole world in his hands and, as Paul went on to say at the end of Romans 8, “*Nothing, absolutely nothing can separate is from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.*”

This rock-solid conviction didn't originate in Paul's heart. For Paul, like all of us was conceived and born in sin. (Psalm 51) It is the conviction brought about by the work of the Holy Spirit. God the Holy Spirit who once turned Paul's life around so that he becomes an apostle, a messenger of God's grace in Jesus Christ instead of a persecutor of the church. (see Acts, ch. 9)

Macartney calls Romans 8:28 “*the gateway to the sublime and mysterious temple of predestination.*”² For in the verses that follow he emphasizes that wonder in which God Almighty set apart a certain number of people whom he

² Macartney, The Greatest Texts in the Bible, p. 612

chose to save. This while not a single one has of himself, herself, the right to salvation.

Macartney also points out that Romans 8:28 is not a statement of God's dealings with all people in general. While it is so that elsewhere the bible says that God causes it to rain and shine on both believers and unbelievers (Matthew 5:45), it is clear that in our text Paul was speaking to those who find their comfort and life in Jesus Christ alone.

Nor does Paul say that all things are good. Far, far from it. Paul knew all about hard, awful, even terrifying things in his life. Just read his second letter to the Corinthians and we hear of the shipwrecks and the battles and beatings that he experienced especially after his conversion. (2 Corinthians 11: 23-25) Paul knew that Christians too experience hatred, persecution, jealousy and defeat. That's why we can't overlook the qualifier in Romans 8:28. "*We know that in all things God works for the good **of those who love him...***"

Just who are they? Surely they are those who, having been set apart by God for His service respond to His call with *love and obedience*. They are the ones who unashamedly will sing with the Psalmist (Ps. 116) "*I love the Lord, for He heard my voice*" (v. 1) and "*O Lord, truly I am your servant, the son of your maidservant; you have freed me from my chains.*" (v. 16)

Though the bible itself says that flood and earthquakes, wars and famines come on believers and unbelievers alike yet the results of these often tragic events are not the same. One house, one believer, stands secure while the other goes to pieces. It is not because the one who stands is of himself strong and unperturbed, in the face of disaster. It is because the Lord God upholds His faithful people in the midst of the cauldron and the crucible.

When believers come under 'the pruning knife' of the Lord they are often made stronger. It's not unlike the discipline soldiers being trained for battle undergo. The obstacles they face on the course may try them to the limit, yet those who persevere are well-equipped for the long run. It is as God says in the Letter to the Hebrews, ch. 12:11

No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it.

It is as Macartney says, “ *The test of belief in God and His providence comes when He sends us hard things.*”³

No, this strengthening in faith and courage, this perseverance ‘under fire’ as it were, does not come by chance. It is so that someone might prune the vine of a poison ivy plant year after year yet it still produces poison! ⁴Adversity can harden, embitter and waste the sufferer unless he/she/they look to the One true God and His Son, the Savior who suffered and died but who lives. Who lives and governs and comforts and nourishes those He bought with His blood.

Therefore dear listeners, do not throw up your hands in despair or curse God, only to die without hope. Turn to the Lord - embrace Him in faith and love. For we are not the “playthings” of fate. God, sovereign God is in charge and he cares very, very much for his own. As we hope to hear next time He is leading all of creation to the day when all sorrow and suffering will be banned and a most amazing peace will flood this earth. Amen, and I hope you’ll listen in again soon.

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³ Ibid. p. 62

⁴ Ibid, p. 62