

# HOW TO PUNCTUATE YOUR PROBLEMS

## ROMANS 8:28-29

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

For whom He foreknew, He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the firstborn among many brethren.

This morning I want to start with an exercise... Focus your attention on the screens. I want to display three lines of what appear to be a random collection of simple words. Here's a jumble of words - sixteen to be exact. Let me read them, "that that is is that that is not is not is not that it it is." And I think we'd all agree that 's a nonsensical sentence. What did that do for you? What did it mean to you? Absolutely nothing.

But here's what I want us to do... We're going to make a few insertions into these sixteen words. We're going to add some punctuation and capitalization.

First, we'll put quotation marks in front of the "first that" and the "last is." Second, we'll capitalize three letters. Let's change to uppercase the "first that" - the first letter in the "fifth is" - and then the first letter in the "last it." Capitalize the "first that", "fifth is", "last it".

Third, insert two commas and a dash. The commas go after the "first is" and the "first not." Insert the dash after the "second is." Finally, let's add an exclamation point, a period, and a question mark. Put the exclamation point after the

"second not." The period goes between the "last is" and the "last quotation mark." And slip the question mark in after the "first it."

Now having added the capitalization and punctuation we should read these sixteen words again. Here's how it should read... "That that is, is - that that is not, is not! Is not that it? It is." Suddenly our nonsensical sentence makes some sense! We just read the exact same sixteen words, in the same order, but with the insertions of capitalization and punctuation this seemingly random collection of words finds meaning.

And this morning I want to teach you how to make sense of your problems. How to punctuate your problems! For right now your life appears to be a jumble of obstacles, and difficulties, and stressful circumstances. Your life doesn't make a lot of sense. Randomness rules. You're perplexed and distressed.

You have to confess... your life is just a mess!

It reminds me of Charlie Brown and Lucy. They were into a heavy philosophical conversation, when Lucy made an astute observation. She said, "Life is like a deck chair, Charlie Brown. Some place it so they can see where they're going; some place it so they can see where they've been; and some place it so they can see where they're at." Charlie Brown thought for a minute and responded, "Well, I can't even get mine unfolded."

Perhaps you feel confused like you can't even get your deck chair unfolded. At times your life resembles a knot that refuses to come untangled. It's a dilemma, a predicament, a

quandary, a riddle, a puzzle. But that's because we haven't punctuate our lives properly.

This morning we're going to take your string of struggles - your jumble of circumstances - and make a few insertions... we'll place quotation marks at the beginning and end - a couple of capitalizations - a few commas and dashes scattered throughout - even an exclamation point - a period - and a question mark...

When you make the proper insertions, instantly your life takes on a whole new meaning. Romans 8:28-29 provide us God's rules for punctuating our problems.

First, let's take your string of problems and add some quotation marks. For God says, not Sandy says - not some counselor says - not a friend trying to cheer you up says - not an advocate of positive thinking says - but, "God the Holy Spirit" says... "All things work together for good to those who love God..."

I want you to think of the problems you're facing and put them between two quotation marks. The situations you're dealing with have been God ordained. God hasn't necessarily caused them... but He's at least allowed them. The Bible teaches that God is over the affairs of men. And as a result, nothing can get to me that it doesn't first pass through Him. Before a trial touches me it first has to get divine authorization - then before God sends it on, He attaches to it a special purpose that He wants to work in my life.

Our problems take on a completely different meaning when we wrap them between divine quotation marks.

On the town square in Enterprise, Alabama there's a monument to the boll weevil. Years ago this rural, farming town made its living off King Cotton, until a swarm of boll weevils invaded their fields, and threatened permanent ruin. As it turned out the enterprising farmers of Enterprise were forced to switch to peanuts that year. And to their surprise, when harvest time came they made more money from peanuts than they had ever made from cotton. They never went back to the cotton. The blight of the boll weevil became a bonanza to the town's economy.

And to acknowledge their appreciation the farmers set up a monument on the town square. Go to Enterprise, Alabama today, and you'll see a marble and bronze statue of an ugly boll weevil. It's a reminder that God hasn't fallen asleep at the helm. He is in control.

God wants to turn your disappointments into divine appointments. Nothing can happen to you or I that our mighty God can't transform into something good.

I have a little sign I found years ago, that I keep in my office. I'm forced to look at it almost every day. It reads, "[God is greater than any problem that I have.](#)"

Think of it, the very thing that is today creating the stress in your life, and the anguish in your heart, and the fear for your future - can one day be the cause of great rejoicing. Imagine, your source of misery will one day become a monument to God's faithfulness!

Now, let's go back to our long string of struggles, and as we did to those sixteen words - let's [capitalize two words for](#)

**emphasis, “All Things”**... God works **"All Things"** together for good - not just a "few things" or "some things" or "most things", but **“All Things”**

Recently, an art gallery in Alexandria Virginia hosted a junk art exhibition. For \$3000 you could purchase a full-length woman's coat, knitted out of plastic garbage bags... The show included model airplanes made from beer cans... A lamp made from an old bowling ball and ten-pin... Sculptures made from rusted picture frames, clock parts, saw blades, truck panels, sardine cans, tea bags, and Band-Aid wrappers... The exhibit gave new meaning to the phrase, **"trash art."**

But God is into trash art! God wants to take the trash in our lives - the shattered dreams, scarred memories, broken heart, battered hopes, bleeding hurts - and turn them into something... oh, so good! He wants to take what we consider the junk in our lives and transform it a valuable and beautiful piece of art!

Sometimes life is like trying to work a thousand piece jigsaw puzzle, without the box top. It's tough to arrange the individual pieces when you lack the big picture.

But our God sees the box top. He knows the end from the beginning. God alone can work the puzzle, and fit all the pieces into their proper place.

A pastor once went to console a family that was grieving the tragic loss of their baby. Trust me, from a pastor's perspective those moments are horribly awkward. Everything you think to say runs the risk of coming across as sounding trite and insensitive.

This particular pastor was groping for words when a hand woven bookmark fell from His Bible. On one side it was a tangled web of thread - on the other side were the embroidered words, "God is love." From our perspective life gets confusing, but from God's perspective He's working "all things together for good."

Reinhold Messner is a famous mountain climber. He was the first of two men to climb Mount Everest without an oxygen tank. Then he decided he needed to climb the mountain by himself - and he succeeded.

Afterwards Messner was asked the stock question all mountain climbers get asked, "Why did you do it?" He replied, "Because at the top all the lines converge."

Friends, your life is a portrait God is in the process of painting, and no matter how random the lines seem right now eventually every brush stroke will come together just as the artist intended. Not a few, or some, or most... but "All Things... work together."

Now back to our punctuation, we also need to sprinkle in a few commas and dashes throughout our problems. Remember your High School English, commas and dashes are connectors - they link together different thoughts in the sentence. And this is what God does with our problems... rather than have them stand alone, they all link up and work together.

The Greek word translated in verse 28 by the phrase "work together," is the word "sunergeo" - from which we get out English word "synergy or synergistic."

And here's how the Webster's dictionary defines the word "synergy" – it's the "cooperative action of various elements to produce an effect greater than, and different from, the sum of each element acting separately." In other words, "the parts do more interacting together than they do working separately."

Take for example common table salt. Salt is the cooperative action of two poisons - sodium and chloride. Consumed alone either of these elements become deadly, but them working together overcomes their harmful effects and even makes them beneficial.

And this is what God does.... He takes the various circumstances of our lives and creates a synergistic effect. He brings together problematic situations and distressing events, in such a way that the ultimate, over-all, in-the-end outcome is good and productive.

Say you're in the kitchen - in the middle of baking a cake - when I walk in and start sampling the ingredients... I taste a pinch of baking soda, drink a sip of extract, eat a handful of flour, or a cup of raw eggs - it doesn't take long before I'm sick to my stomach.

By themselves - on their own - the ingredients won't taste very good, but if I allowed you to mix up those ingredients, and give them time to bake - eventually I'll be enjoying a delicious dessert - a pleasure to taste.

And this is what God does. Many of life's experiences if consumed by themselves tastes bitter and nauseous. But God can take those ingredients, mix them exactly, bake them

thoroughly, and transform them into a dish that's tasty, and pleasing, and good.

Once a sailor was stranded on a desert island. It was a daily struggle for him just to survive. After several weeks he managed to build a make-shift hut which protected him from the brutal weather, and provided him a place to store the food he could gather.

One day the cast-away was out searching for food, when he noticed a fire rising above the trees. He raced back, to find his hut engulfed in flames. What a bummer! The man sunk into a deep depression. All he had worked for had suddenly gone up in smoke.

But the next morning, the sailor spied a ship sailing towards the island. It was a rescue party. When he asked the captain how he knew he was on the island, he said he'd seen the signal fire. What the sailor had interpreted at the time as a catastrophe, and had caused his deep depression, had been his salvation.

God uses apparent tragedies - along with the right circumstances and timing - to do His work. Perhaps that's what He's up to in your life this very second!

God works **"all things together for good!"** Friends, you've got to believe it... all that's coming down in your life is happening to you for your good and God's glory!

This is why we need to add **an exclamation point!** This is a promise we all should get excited about!



Of course, the word “good” is a relative term. What’s good to you may not be good to me... For example you might enjoy the taste of butterscotch candy. Your whacky taste buds think butterscotch candy tastes good, but I hate butterscotch. I'd rather suck on pigs' feet than entertain the taste of butterscotch...

God works all things together for “good” according to His definition of “good,” not necessarily my definition.

If you read Romans 8:28, and think “good” means an easy-going, smooth-sailing, trouble-free life - or if you think it means a fat bank account, and rungs up the corporate ladder, and never a conflict with your friends or family - then you're misreading the verse.

Nothing in this life grows without struggle and pain. God’s “good” is not a continual, picnic-in-the-park - it’s the kind of good that molds godly character, stretches our endurance, and forces us to build on to our faith.

This is why Romans 8:28 is one of the most misinterpreted verses in the Bible. People quote it as if it said, “all things work together for my good” - but that's not what it says. God's goal is not just your good, it’s for your good, plus my good, plus God’s good.

God is at work in the circumstances of your life to achieve a mixture of your good, and other people's gain, and His glory! God’s intention in the trials of this life is not some cheap, superficial, selfish version of good... God wants to produce a solid, eternal good!

Once a professor at Georgia Tech said to a struggling student, "Son, you don't have enough sense to stand on the corner and sell hotdogs." Well, after flunking out of Tech the boy decided to take up his professor's suggestion! He threw up a shack on North Avenue and started selling hotdogs. The year was 1928... the student's name was "Frank Gordy"... and the name of his hotdog stand was... "The Varsity."

Once on a visit to the Varsity, Irvin Walker told me the story of Frank Gordy. Irvin worked at the Varsity for 44 years. He said the Varsity made Gordy a multi-millionaire, but it also helped him provide for all 12 of his kids. Frank Gordy's failure was a blessing to Irvin.

In fact there's another man - his name is Sandy Adams - and he says that Mr. Gordy's restaurant has provided him countless hours of dining pleasure. To me, nothing can beat a Varsity chili-steak and fries.

But here's the point, Frank Gordy's misfortune became a chain reaction of good. It became a blessing for Frank Gordy - for Irvin Walker - for the 12 Walker kids - for Sandy Adams - and even for my wife and grandkids... Our first date was to the Varsity. Kathy and I fell in love over onion rings and a Frosted Orange.

On a more serious note, Myra Welch, the famous poet was once interviewed. Ms. Welch wrote the inspirational ballad, "The Touch of the Master's Hand." Over the years her popular poem has warmed the hearts, and encouraged the faith of millions of people.

When the interview was over, the reporter went to leave, but Ms. Welch stopped him. She patted her wheelchair and said,

"I also want to thank God for this, if I'd never been confined to a wheelchair I'd never have cultivated my love for poetry." According to Ms. Welch, her wheelchair turned into help for thousands.

Initially, God's work may seem harsh. The storms appear dark, heavy, and threatening. But God's clouds always contain a silver lining. God's good eventually rises out of the storm. Trust Him. He sees to it that **"all things work together for good... to those who love God, to those who are called according to his purpose."**

I want you to notice though that God's promise in these verses is not an open-ended offer. There's **a period** at the end of the promise! This wonderful word of comfort and hope only applies to those who **"love God"** and **"are called according to His purpose."**

You might say, **"I love God, but I'm not sure about His will for my life? What is God's purpose for me?"** In verse 29 Paul tells us that it's God's will for us **"to be conformed to the image of His Son."** **God's purpose for you and me is to make us like Jesus.** If this is your goal, then **"all things will work together for good."**

So often we think of the will of God as a particular activity, or a specific place, or a relationship - when in reality the will of God is a process. God's will is not a destination - as much as it is the journey itself, and the person God plans to make us along the way.

God wants to fashion us into the image of His Son Jesus! He wants our manners to be full of grace, our heart full of love, our actions full of His glory. God wants us to circulate

the warmth of Christ - emanate the strength of Christ - radiate the goodness of Christ. God wants His servants to take after their Master.

As we've learned in Romans if you trust in Jesus, inwardly God has made you a new creation. Spiritually you are the righteousness of Christ. Now God wants all that love, and goodness and kindness to ooze from your spiritual pores into your attitudes and actions.

When Michelangelo finished his statue of "David" the great artist was asked how he had created such a masterpiece. He answered, "I saw a figure trapped in the stone, and I chiseled away the rock to free it."

And this is how God looks at you. He sees the inner man - made perfect and righteous through the blood of Jesus - but it's surrounded by rough, shapeless rock. So God uses trials and circumstances to chip and chisel away sinful and selfish habits to free the inner man from its fleshly prison. He shapes our attitudes and actions until they reveal the new creation in Christ.

Other people may see you as a lump of stone - a real blockhead, perhaps - or they take you for granite, but God sees you as you really are in Christ. And He is determined to sculpt and shape and mold you - until the life people see reflects the person that you are.

In verse 29, the word translated "conform" is the Greek word "morphos." From it we get our English word "metamorphosis." A metamorphosis is defined as "a striking, or apparent change - an alteration of type."

When a wormy-looking caterpillar turns into a colorful, fluttering butterfly we call it a metamorphosis, or when a rock turns into a crystal it's labeled a metamorphic rock. In Geology 101 we are taught that the formation of metamorphic rock involves three forces: **heat, water, pressure**. And in a spiritual sense those same three forces are at work to change us...

The **heat** is the presence of the Holy Spirit. He softens the clay, and burns off the impurities from our lives... The **water** is God's Word, which cleanses our thinking and builds up our faith... And the **pressure** is what Paul is discussing in verse 29. God uses trials and difficulties to pressure us into a spiritual change.

And understand God doesn't flinch when it comes to subjecting us to hardship... Realize our eternal God sees the future, and He knows that right now is the only short timeframe when we'll have the opportunity to experience friction. For all eternity we'll enjoy shalom or peace. Our destiny is eternal blessing. Right now is our only opportunity to be shaped by hostility or pain.

This is why God is not timid or squeamish to put us through the fire. He used the vice-grip of circumstance. God won't hesitate to use a little momentary pain to shape and fashion a permanent change in our lives.

CS Lewis once said, "**God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks to us in our conscience, but He shouts to us in our pain. Pain is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world.**" Spiritually speaking, pleasure tends to lull us to sleep, but pain grabs our attention!

It reminds me of a poem by Robert Browning Hamilton, "I walked a mile with Pleasure; she chatted all the way - But left me none the wiser for all she had to say - I walked a mile with Sorrow and ne'er a word said she - But, oh, the things I learned from her when Sorrow walked with me!" God uses even sorrow.

The cocoon of the emperor moth is funnel-shaped. When it's time for the moth to leave the cocoon it rises through its narrow neck. The moth squeezes through until it escapes. Biologists tell us it's the pressure on the moth's body, as it compresses through the opening, that releases the juices that fill the vessels in its wings, and ultimately causes those wings to fully develop.

Once a little boy saw an emperor moth struggling to shed its cocoon and fly to freedom. Out of pity he took some scissors, and snipped the threads of the cocoon to make the exit easier. But without the applied pressure, the wings never properly formed, and the moth spent his brief life crawling rather than flying.

Friends, when we try to escape life's pressures, and run from the struggles - we never properly develop. We end up crawling spiritually, rather than soaring!

I love the pithy jingle, "God puts you in a fix to fix you not the fix. If you try to fix the fix God puts you in, He's got to put you in another fix to fix the fix He wanted to fix in the first place." If you didn't get that the first time, let's try it again... In short, God uses trials to fix us.

Finally, let's place at the end of our string of struggles a **question mark**. We know verse 28 is true, but the question is will we believe it and embrace it?

Verse 28 assumes we know it's true. Paul says, "**And we know all things work together for good**". There are some things in life we don't know - some things we can't know - some things we should know - but there are a few things we do know! And this is one of them.

Every believer knows "**all things work together for good.**" This is a truth that Christians should realize even if the book of Romans had never been written. This is a truth we should discern intuitively. And why? Because, every Christian has been to the cross!

At Calvary God set a pattern. He took history's greatest tragedy, and turned it into its greatest victory. What appeared to be a catastrophe, an ugly upset, a devastating defeat, God worked it for good! Through the death of His only Son, salvation came to all men. You could say, God specializes in commandeering sad stories, and giving them happy endings!

Paul reminds you and me, "**we know**" this wonderful truth... And he's right - I know it - you know it - we just don't always want to admit that we know it....

For rather than rise up in faith, and grab hold of the comfort in this verse, we tend to enjoy a good sulk. Often, we prefer to whine and snivel - gripe and complain about our circumstances - and "**the bum rap**" we've gotten. We love to throw a good pity party.

Remember the story of Joseph. His brothers hated him. Joseph was his father's favorite. They wanted to snuff him out, but ended up selling him to slave traders headed for Egypt. When the jealous brothers returned home they lied to their father, Jacob - told him their kid brother was dead. He'd been eaten by wild animals.

And through a miraculous turn of events Joseph prospered in Egypt, eventually rising to second in command in Pharaoh's court.... So when famine fell upon the region Joseph's guilty brothers came to Egypt looking for food. Joseph had rationed the nation's grain, and Egypt was the only country with a surplus. And it was to Joseph his brothers had to come.

When Joseph finally revealed himself to his brothers he summed up his painful ordeal in one of the Bible's most instructive verses. He told them, "You meant it for evil; but God meant it for good, in order... to save many people." In the end, Joseph was able to rejoice in the fact his trials had resulted in good for an entire region.

It's interesting though, Joseph's dad, Jacob, expressed the opposite attitude. Earlier in the story, before Joseph had revealed his identity, he made his brothers return to their dad and ask him if they could bring his youngest son, Benjamin, with them to Egypt. Joseph held an older brother, Simeon, as hostage.

When Jacob was told what was being asked, he cried out, "Joseph is no more, Simeon is no more, and you want to take Benjamin away. All these things are against me." What was



Jacob saying? In essence, he's saying that all things don't work together for good!

Jacob was denying Romans 8:28. He's calling God a liar. Rather than for him, in his favor - he's saying that events have risen that are against him. Realize, Jacob knew in his heart that God works all things together for good, but at that moment he didn't want to confess or agree with that assessment. Jacob, a patriarch of our faith, liked belly-aching over promise-taking!

Understand, when we cry, "woe is me," we deny "great is God." Satan is continuously sending out the invitation, "Come unto me all you who are grieved and peeved, and I'll sympathize with your bitterness." I've heard it stated, "Self pity always weeps on the devil's shoulder." We need to stop painting ourselves as victims when God has promised to make us victors.

Hey, the way to make sense out of nonsensical circumstances is to insert the proper punctuation.

Punctuate your problems according to Romans 8:28 and the outlook changes. Dilemmas and difficulties, trials and hardships - take on a dramatic new meaning.

Wrap your problems between **divine quotation marks**, for God has said!... **Capitalize** the "All" in your circumstances... Use **a few commas and dashes** to mix it together... Drop in **the exclamation point** - good is the goal even when it involves pain... Remember, God's top objective is to make us like Jesus, **period...**

And lastly, don't forget **the question mark!** You know this verse is true, but the question is - are you going to embrace it, live it, trust in it, and praise the Lord for it?

Let me ask again, **are you a belly-acher or a promise-taker?** Punctuate your problems with Romans 8:28, and your problems will no longer be problems.