

THE WORKING OF ALL THINGS TOGETHER FOR GOOD

Preached at Providence Chapel, Eden Street, London, on
Lord's Day Morning, July 8, 1849

"And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose." Romans 8:28

The child of God seems to me often to resemble a benighted traveller. He has left his home, and is struggling onward to a certain destination. He is surrounded on every side with mists and darkness; still he struggles onward. But looking up into the sky, he sees a star glimmer through the clouds: by-and-by another appears; and by-and-by another; till at last all the mist and fog are dispersed, and the stars shine forth in all their beauty and glory. Thus is it often with the child of God. He has left the world; he is struggling onward to his heavenly home; but he often walks in darkness and has no light; little else but mists and fogs surround the path he is treading. In this state, perhaps he opens the word of God; or, as he is musing over his many trials, a text, a promise breaks in upon his mind, and that shews him the mist and fog are breaking up; by-and-by another portion of God's word, another sweet promise comes into his soul; and this encourages him still more, till by-and-by the Bible seems full of promises, shining forth in the pages of the sacred volume more thickly and gloriously than the stars that spangle the midnight sky.

Among these bright stars that glimmer in the firmament of Scripture, there is scarcely one more resplendent than our text. Let us travel through the promises upon record, and we can scarcely find one more sweet or suitable to an exercised child of God than this, "We know that all things work

together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose."

In looking at these words this morning, I shall, for the sake of greater clearness, somewhat invert the order, and show,

First, who the characters are that are interested in this promise.

Secondly, the promise itself, and

Thirdly, the knowledge of the promise, and of our personal interest in it. The Lord grant his presence; and enable me to speak such things as he shall bless to our souls.

1.—**First**, then, let us consider the **characters** to whom the promise belongs. Now it is necessary to make the ground good here; for if we err here, we err everywhere. Let me illustrate this by an example or two taken from the things of common life. A man makes a will; when he dies, and the will is opened and read, the very first thing to be settled is the person in whose favour the will is made. Until that is settled, there is no going a step further. Or, there is a society founded for a certain object. This society has certain objects in view, certain characters on whom it bestows its liberality. There are prescribed limits; as age, poverty, being members of the household of faith; and if these qualifications are not in the individual, he cannot be a candidate. So it is spiritually. Unless we make the ground good at first by coming to some clear decision who are the characters interested in this promise, we are all in confusion; we do not make straight paths for our feet; our eyes do not look onward, nor our eyelids straight before us. It is absolutely necessary, therefore, in order to make the ground good, to

clear up who the characters are in favour of whom the promise is made.

If we look at these characters, we shall find them described as bearing two distinct marks,

1 that they "love God;"

2 that they are "the called according to God's purpose." If a man, then, do not love God, and be not called according to God's purpose, he has no manifest interest in this promise. And if, on the other hand, he bear these two marks, that he loves God, and that he is called according to God's purpose, the promise is intended for him, and is ready to discharge its full contents into his heart.

I. First, then, let us look a little more closely at the character set forth as **a lover of God**. We are very certain this never can be true of any man in a state of nature, for "the carnal mind is enmity against God;" and if so, there cannot be any love to God in his heart. He is therefore excluded from the benefit of the promise; his name is not in the will.

But, in order to make this weighty matter more clear and plain, let us see what the Scriptures say of those who love God. I think we shall find in the first epistle of John three marks given us of those who love him; and by these three marks may we try our state. Let us, then, bring our hearts and consciences to the test of God's unerring word, and see whether we can find these three marks of the lovers of God in our soul. We read, "Love is of God, and every one that loveth is born of God, and knoweth God." **1Jo 4:7** Here, then, are two marks which the Holy Ghost has given of him that loves God, that he is **born** of God, and that he **knoweth** God. And if we look a little lower down, we shall find a third

mark, "This is the love of God that **we keep his commandments.**" **1Jo 5:3**

These, then, are the three marks of a man being a lover of God:

1. that he is **born** of God;
2. that he **knoweth** God; and
3. that he **keepeth God's commandments.**

1. But what is it to be **born** of God? We read of those who were followers of the Lord Jesus Christ, that they were "born not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God." **Joh 1:13** A heavenly birth is contrasted here with the birth of the flesh; the one is set aside, and the other set up. To be born of God is to be quickened into spiritual life by the Holy Ghost; to have passed from death unto life; to have faith, hope and love brought forth in our hearts by the operation of God the Spirit; to be made new creatures in Christ; to have the kingdom of heaven set up, and the power of God felt in our souls. If, then, a man can feel that he is born of God; that a mighty revolution has taken place in his soul; that he is a new creature in Christ; that old things are passed away and all things become new: if he has the witness of God in his conscience that this divine change has taken place in him, and that a measure of the love of God has been shed abroad in his heart by the Holy Ghost—then he has an evidence that he is one who loves God. and therefore has an interest in the promise before us.

2. Our **second** mark of one that loves God is, that he knows God. This we cannot know by nature, for there is a veil of unbelief over our heart. We are born in darkness and the

shadow of death: but when God is pleased to shine into our souls, and give us "the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ;" to take the veil of unbelief away, and give us that knowledge of himself as the only true God, and of Jesus Christ whom he hath sent, which is eternal life—then we know God; we know who he is, and we fear his great Name.

3. The **third** mark is, that we **keep his commandments**, that we come out of the world, and are separate from it; that we desire to do his will, to serve him, and to walk before him in simplicity, humility, and godly sincerity; that his fear is alive in us; that we obey him, and do those things that are pleasing in his sight.

But why do I mention these marks? For this reason; because the children of God are often tried and exercised whether they do love him. There are so many things in their hearts to oppose the love of God. There is the world; a going out in their carnal mind after the things of time and sense; sin working in them, bringing them continually into bondage; darkness of mind, so as to be unable to see their signs; deadness of soul, so that the love of God seems reduced to the last spark. All these things are so opposite to the love of God that they seem at times not to have one grain of it in their hearts. And when they would fain look back to certain spots, times, and seasons, when they did feel the love of God shed abroad in their hearts, when they could delight themselves in the Almighty, when his word was sweeter than honey and the honeycomb, and they could walk before him in holy obedience and love, I say, when they would fain look back upon these favourite spots, times, and seasons, they often cannot. Such is the darkness of their minds they can scarcely see the hill Mizar, or remember him from the land of Jordan and of the Hermonites. Therefore, it is necessary to

look to certain marks of God's word. The landmarks in our experience are sometimes swept away, or clouds of darkness cover them. We therefore must look to the unerring landmarks of God's word, which, unlike the landmarks of experience, are never swept away, but stand there firmly fixed by the pen of the Holy Ghost. If therefore, with all our doubts and fears and misgivings, our hardness of heart, our unbelief, darkness of mind, and deadness of frame, we can find these three marks in our souls, that we have been born of God, that we know him, and that we are keeping his commandments and desiring to do his will, we have Scripture testimony that we are of those who love God, and therefore have an interest in this promise.

II.—Our **second** mark is, that such are the "called according to God's purpose." This seems to be added as a kind of supplement to clear up the first mark; and added for this twofold purpose. First, to exclude all men in a state of nature. A man, in a state of nature, might say, 'I love God; I love to walk abroad, and mark his glory in the beauties of creation. I look up by night, and as I see the stars in the sky I recognize in them a heavenly Architect. I am sure I love God.' A man in a state of nature may do this. Now this seems added to cut off such. It says, 'No; all those that love God are the called according to his purpose.' A man must be called; there must be a work of grace upon his soul before he can be a true spiritual lover of God.

But there is another purpose also. The child of God may say, Do I love God? If so, what love do I **now** feel? Are my affections **now in** heaven? Do I feel my soul **now** desiring the Lord more than thousands of gold and silver? Is my heart **now** softened and melted by the sweet operations of his grace, mercy, and love? No;' the poor child of God says, I feel too much the contrary—hardness, darkness, carnality—

perhaps enmity, rebellion—how can I, then hope I am the character for whom this promise is made? Yet if I be not a lover of God, I have no interest in it.

To clear up this dark path, it seems added by way of supplement, "called according to God's purpose." His purpose is not affected by what we are, or what we have. His purpose is still going on. We may be in darkness and deadness; but our darkness does not alter God's purpose; our deadness does not change his decree. We may not have the sweet enjoyment of his love in our hearts; but still his 'purpose' remains unchanged and unchangeable, like its divine Author.

But how can we prove we are called according to God's purpose? Love may flag; evidences may fade; hope may droop; enjoyment may cease; but the calling still remains. Can we, then, look back to any time or spot when the Lord signally called us? Can we cast an eye on the path we have trodden in the ways of grace, and say that none but the Lord could have separated us from the sins in which we were entangled, the company with which we were mixed, the course we were pursuing? Can we remember there were at the time certain feelings which none but God could inspire? certain operations in our hearts which none but God could perform? certain effects which nothing but a heavenly hand moving upon the soul could create? If we cannot **now** trace distinctly that we are the lovers of God; if we cannot now feel the love of God shed abroad in our hearts, yet we may compare ourselves with the three marks I have given, and take some comfort from them; or even if these three marks be buried in obscurity, we may still cast an eye along the vista which we have trodden, and see the hand of God stretched out in a manifestive way to call us out of nature's darkness into his marvellous light.

I have been thus particular, and dwelt thus long upon this portion of the text, because I love to make sure ground. Let us make the ground good—then we can step safely on; but if the ground be sandy, the foundation uncertain, we are faulty at the very outset. There is no advancing a single step till the ground be made good. I will suppose, then, the ground is thus far made good, and that there are in this congregation those who have some internal testimony that they are lovers of God, and that they are "called according to God's purpose."

II.—But I proceed to the substance of the promise, "**that all things work together for good**" to such characters. Every word here is pregnant with blessed import: we could not part with a single syllable. And yet, what an exalted view does it give us of the wisdom, providence, and power of God! Look at this complicated scene. Here are God's people, surrounded by a thousand mysterious circumstances, travelling in the various paths of life—station, age, sex, circumstances, all widely different. Here is the world lying in wickedness around them—a crafty adversary ever on the watch to beguile or harass them,—a heart full of sin to overflowing, except as kept down by the mighty power of God! Look at all our varied circumstances; and then to believe that if we are the lovers of God, all things we experience are working together for our spiritual good, what a view does it give us of the wisdom, grace, and power of a wonder-working God! Let us bear with all our weight upon the text: it will bear all the strain that we can put upon it. "All things!" Look at that! All that concerns our body and soul; everything in providence, everything in grace; everything you have passed through, everything you are passing through, everything you shall pass through.

Let each of you who love God, and fear his name in this congregation, take everything belonging to you, and lay it

upon this text, as you might lay hymn-books and Bibles on the table before me. There is not a single thing in providence or grace that concerns any person in this congregation who loves God that the promise cannot bear. "All things! all things!" What! is there not a single thing, however minute, however comparatively unimportant, that is not for my good if I love God? No, not one. If there were a single thing, this text would not be true; God would speak an untruth. If there were a single thing which befalls me, be it in providence, or be it in grace, that is not working together for my good, if I am a child of God, I say it with reverence, that this would be a lie in God's book. And yet, when we consider the variety of things that affect us—to believe that all of them are working together for our good, how must we admire the wonderful wisdom, and power, and government of God.

But let us, by the way of casting a clearer light upon the words, "all things," look at them more minutely. All things that take place are either according to God's decretive appointment, or according to his permissive appointment. Many things that try your mind, and exercise your souls, are according to God's decretive appointment. Everything with which sin or Satan are not intermingled, we may say, comes from God's decretive appointment; and if we are lovers of God, they are working together for our good. **Are we tried in our circumstances?** This is according to God's decretive appointment. Is it the Lord's will and pleasure to bring us down in the world, by sorrows and adversities in providence? This is still according to God's decretive appointment. **Have we afflictions in the family?** It is still according to God's decretive appointment. It comes from him. Nothing can happen in body, in property, in family, that does not spring from God's decretive appointment. Are children taken away? They are taken by the hand of God. "The Lord giveth, and the Lord taketh away." Is wife or husband afflicted? The hand

of God is in it. Is the body brought down with sickness? It cometh from God. Is the mind tried with a thousand perplexities, anxieties, and cares? It is still the hand of God. All these matters spring from his **decretive** appointment! But is Satan permitted to harass and distress our minds? This is only by God's **permissive** appointment. He could do nothing against Job until God gave him permission. Have we enemies in the church or in the world? Have we to endure persecution for Christ's sake? slander, calumny, and opposition? Shimei was permitted to curse David; and Jeroboam was raised up in consequence of the idolatry of Solomon. All is still according to God's permissive' appointment. Are we tried by the evils of our fallen nature? It is still according to God's permissive appointment; for nothing can take place, either in providence or in grace, except as God in his infinite wisdom has decreed to perform, or decreed to allow.

But all these things, however trying to our minds, however hard to bear, however painful to our flesh, are decreed to work together. They do not work singly, but they work together with something else. It is like my watch. The wheel that turns the hand is not the same wheel that is moved by the spring; but one wheel works within another wheel, and one cog catches in another cog, until at length the time of day is shown upon the dial. So with respect to our afflictions, our exercises, the trials of our minds, the various disappointments and perplexities we have to endure; they do not work singly, but together with something else; and it is by this working together with something else that they produce a divine and blessed result.

But what is that with which they work. The grace of God in the soul. The wheel of providence works with the wheel of grace; and the wheel of grace works with the wheel of

providence; and together a blessing is the result. For instance. Some affliction befalls your body; you are laid upon a sick bed. That affliction will do you no good in itself; but it works together with the grace of God in your soul; and by its working together with the grace of God in your soul, a blessing is the result. Or, you are brought down in circumstances: you have a very difficult path to tread in providence. This will do you no good in itself; there are thousands of persons in bad circumstances who get no good from them. But it works together with the life and power of God in your soul; and so it produces a blessing. Or, you may lose a wife, or a child, or have sickness in your family; in themselves no good is produced by these things; but they work together with the life and power of God in your soul; and this brings about the blessing. In this word lies the mystery—they **work together**.

But what do they **work together for?** "For **good**." But what do we call **good**? We must not take **our** idea of good, but God's idea of the matter. We must not take what we fancy to be good, but what is really and truly so in his eyes. For instance. A man may say, it is very good to have health; it may be so in his eyes, but not so in God's. Another may say, it is a very good thing to **get on in the world**, to have a flourishing business, and prosperous trade; that may be good in his eyes, but not in God's. Another may say, it is good for me to have a family **growing up** in health and strength, and well provided for: it may be so in his eyes; but it does not follow that it is good in the Lord's. Another may say, it is good to have no troubles, no temptations, no wicked heart, no devil to beguile or harass; it may seem very good in his eyes, but it does not follow that it is so in God's eyes. He is judge in these matters.

What, then, are we to say is "good?" Whatever produces spiritual profit and a blessing; **that** which is really good in the eyes of a heart-searching God.

Now just see whether all these things do not in this sense work together for good to them that love God, and are the called according to his purpose. You have had an afflicted body. Well, that in itself did you no good; for it incapacitated you for business, troubled your mind, made you a burden to yourself and a burden to all around you. There was no good in that. But suppose it weaned you from the world; suppose it set death before your eyes, made you die daily, stirred up a spirit of prayer and supplication in your heart; suppose it opened up those promises of God which are suitable to his afflicted family; suppose it was the means of blessing your soul with some sweet manifestation of your interest in the love and blood of the Lamb—are you then to say, that your sickness, your affliction has not been for good, when it worked together with the grace of God in your soul to bring forth a real blessing? Or, you have had reverses in the world, have lost money in trade, and are now in distressed circumstances. There is no good in these things considered abstractly; but do they stir up the life and power of God in your soul? do they give you an errand to the throne of grace? do they shew you what is in your heart? do they call forth confession before God? do they make Jesus near and dear to your souls? do they wean you from the world? then they have worked together for your good. You have lost a child, or have an afflicted wife, and unhealthy family; there is no good in that; for "the sorrow of the world worketh death." But suppose that this wife or child has become your idol; that you have worshipped it instead of worshipping God,—why, then, this affliction works together for good, if through it your heart's affections are now fixed on the Lord Jesus alone. Thus we are to measure this good, not by what the creature

thinks, but by what God himself has declared to be good in his word, and what we have felt to be good in our soul's experience. Have your trials humbled you, made you meek and lowly? They have done you good. Have they stirred up a spirit of prayer in your bosom, made you sigh, cry, and groan for the Lord to appear, visit, or bless your soul? They have done you good. Have they opened up those parts of God's word which are full of mercy and comfort to his afflicted people? They have done you good. Have they stripped off the covering that is too narrow? They have done you good. Have they made you more sincere, more earnest, more spiritual, more heavenly-minded, more convinced that the Lord Jesus can alone bless and comfort your soul? They have done you good. Have they been the means in God's hand of giving you a lift in hearing the preached word, of opening your ears to hear none but the true servants of God, those who enter into a tried path, and describe a gracious experience? They have done you good. Have they made the Bible more precious to you, the promises more sweet, the dealings of God with your soul more prized? They have done you good.

Now this is the way, that "all things work together for good." Not by puffing you up with pride, but by filling your heart with humility; not by encouraging presumption, but by raising your affections to where Jesus sits at the right hand of God; not by carrying us into the world, but by bringing us out of it; not by covering us with a veil of ignorance and arrogance, but by stripping this veil off, and bringing light, life, and power into the soul. In this way, "all things work together for good to them that love God, and are the called according to his purpose."

III.—And this leads me to our **third** point, which is our **knowledge** of these things. "We **know** that all things work together for good." How do we **know** it?. We know it in two

ways. We know it, **first**, from the testimony of God's **word**: and we know it **secondly**, from the testimony of God in our own **conscience**.

1. Let us look at the record of **God's word**. See the saints of old; how afflicted they were! But did not all things work together for good to them? Look at Jacob! What sorrows, trials and afflictions the aged patriarch went through! his whole life one continued scene of trouble and sorrow. But did not all work together for his good? Was there one too many, or one too heavy? Could he not in the end lay his head upon his dying pillow, and bless and thank God for them all? Look at Joseph! Did not all things work together for his good? His brethren's enmity; his being sold into Egypt; the wicked conduct of his master's wife: his being cast into prison: his interpreting the chief butler's and baker's dreams. How all these things worked together for his good, and brought him out to occupy the next place to Pharaoh himself, and be the means in the hand of God of keeping alive the people of Israel. Look at David! Hunted on the mountains like a partridge; continually exposed to the spear of Saul; on every hand nothing but persecution and distress: on all sides affliction and sorrow. Yet all things worked together for his good. What blessed Psalms we have in consequence! What a sweet treasury of comfort for God's people through David being thus hunted about on the mountains and in the wilderness! How suitable they are to God's poor tried and tempted family! If David had not had all these persecutions and afflictions, he never could have written the Psalms, nor would there have been in them such treasures of consolation. Look at Job's troubles and afflictions! Children taken away; property swept off in a moment; his body plagued with boils; his friends turned to enemies; and God himself appearing to be against him. Yet, how all things worked together for good in his case!

2. And have we not in our measure proved the same? When trials came, we could not see that they were working together for good. No: perhaps you have sometimes been, as I have felt, in such a state as to believe we never should see the day when they would prove for our good. They were so dark in themselves, so mysterious, so painful, so trying, so perplexing, that in the unbelief of our mind, we could scarcely believe that God himself could ever convince us they were working together for our spiritual good. But has there been any trial, any temptation, any exercise, any affliction, any sorrow, which has not in some way or other worked together for our spiritual good—in humbling us, shewing us more of what we are, opening up the Scriptures to us, stirring up a spirit of prayer, making Jesus precious, throwing light upon God's truth, or applying that truth with a measure of sweetness and comfort to our souls? Thus, we know from our own experience as well as Scripture, that "all things work together for good to them that love **God**, and are the called according to his purpose."

But, you may say, 'I do not see it **now**.' No; there is the trying point. 'I do not feel it at this **present moment**.' No. Did you see your past trials at the very moment that they were working together for your good? When the Lord afflicted your body, brought you down in circumstances, sent disease into your family, suffered your mind to be tried with the fiery darts of the devil, and a thousand temptations and perplexities—I want to know whether **at the time** you could speak confidently, 'I know that what I am now passing through will work together for my spiritual good.' If you could say that, then I will add this—it was not half a trial. If you are passing through any trial, sorrow, or temptation; and can look up unto God, and say, 'I know and am persuaded that this very thing is working together for my spiritual good—if

you can say that, you have got through more than half the trial. It is this which aggravates the trials, temptations, and exercises of God's people for the most part, that when they are in them they have not this blessed confidence.

But say, that they have faith to see that all the trials and afflictions that grieve and burden them are working together for their spiritual good, then they do not want much comfort from God's word, and have no communion with God's tried saints. If I can fight my own battles, I do not want a precious Jesus to bring me off more than conqueror. And thus we should lose all the blessedness of having something to look back upon, and to say, 'I was in this trial, and it did me that good; I was upon that bed of affliction, and it brought me this blessing; I had that reverse of circumstances, and it did me good; I had that trouble in my family, and it did me good; I was harassed with this temptation, and it did me good; I was put into this furnace, and it did me good; sifted in that sieve, and it did me good; had these oppositions, and they did me good.' When we can look back and say, 'there has not been a single trial that has not worked in some measure for my good'—that experience encourages us to look forward, and to believe that present trials will have the same result—and that all things are working together for good to us as far as we love God, and are the called according to his purpose.

Thus we may resolve it all. There is no man that can say, 'I can make my trials work together for good.' He cannot manage that he must have them; and it is a mercy to have them. It is a mercy when we are enabled to bring our trials, our exercises, our temptations to the Lord's feet, and say, 'Lord, here I am, with all my trials, troubles, exercises; I cannot manage them; they are too much for me; do thou undertake for me; do thou bring me off more than

conqueror; do thou appear for me; do thou bless me; do thou cause all my trials, exercises, and temptations to work together for my spiritual good; let the trial be sharp, let the affliction be heavy, let there be nothing in it but what is most painful and grievous, yet, Lord, if I can but believe that they are working together for my spiritual good, I can bear them all!' If we have found that this has been the result of all that has passed, it may enable us at times to believe it for all that is to come, and to look up in confidence that nothing can happen to us, be it in providence or in grace,—but can and will "work together for good to them that love God, and are the called according to his purpose."