

“How to Use Our Hotline to God”
Romans 8:26-39
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Many people seem to think that ministers have a hotline to God, some direct link to the Almighty that is especially helpful in times of need. And as it so happens, I have one (bring out phone), it says so right here... I received this little gem at a Sunday School class Christmas party as part of a White Elephant gift exchange. Not all of the gifts at these parties can be displayed from behind a pulpit, but this one can.

Al and Nancy Hunter brought it to the party, which lets you know it was the Pathfinders Class. And the way it works is that you pick up the receiver, push the button and activate your hotline to God, seriously, because what you hear is scripture verses read, words of assurance that have comforted the faithful over the years, a kind of hotline to God.

Of course, we all have a hotline to God. The Bible isn't just for ministers. And we all have go-to verses or passages we have found helpful over the years – Psalm 23, Isaiah 40:31, John 3:16, Philippians 4:13 and many others. We have read one of these verses today. It is found in the 8th chapter of Romans, the 28th verse.

In the NRSV it reads, “We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.” In times of trouble, when the worst happens, we long for some word of assurance from God. For Christians, the Bible is our primary source for wisdom and most of us have specific verses that help us. Romans 8:28 is near the top of the list for many people, and for good reason.

But before we accept this reality and move on, I'd like to suggest that having our hotline to God is not enough. We also need to know how to use it. I'm not saying there is one set of verses with one set of correct interpretations. God speaks to us in different ways. But it is helpful to have some understanding of the texts we embrace. In regard to Romans 8:28, there is a word of assurance, but there are also some tricky issues, in addition to much wisdom in the surrounding verses.

Part of the issue with Romans 8:28 lies in its translation and part lies with the text behind the translation. When our own biblical scholar Elmo Scoggin was asked what his favorite translation of the Bible was, he would say, “Every translation is an interpretation. I don’t like any translation!” The trouble is not all of us speak Hebrew, Greek and Aramaic. So, we have to have translations, but we need to recognize their imprecision at certain points.

This imprecision is heightened when we have textual variants. Most of us know we have no complete original texts of any book in the Bible. What we have are early copies from various centuries which scholars compare and assess for reliability and then use to assemble a composite Hebrew Old Testament and Greek New Testament from which to translate into other languages, including English. There are quite a few variances, but most make little substantive difference, and none of this reduces the confidence we have in scripture as a whole.

But there are variances that matter and thus make translation more challenging. Without going into all the details of Romans 8:28, there are two different Greek readings and thus at least two different translation possibilities. One we have read today, “All things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.” The other is, “In all things *God works* for good with those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.”

The textual evidence is comparable for both translations, but there is a big difference between the two, between all things working for good and God working for good. As my theology professor Frank Tupper put it, both are grammatically possible, but one is theologically superior. Do *all* things work together for good, including the Holocaust, the 2004 Tsunami in the Indian ocean that took a quarter of a million lives and the more personal tragedies we face? It is difficult to see how, even taking into account the limits of our vision. But that God might be at work to bring good out of all experiences is plausible, hopeful even.

This does not mean God directly causes everything, including suffering. When Scottish minister William Barclay’s daughter and soon-to-be son-in-law drowned tragically, a listener to his daily broadcasts sent him an anonymous letter, saying, “Dear Dr. Barclay, I

now know why God killed your daughter; it was to save her from being corrupted by your heresies.” Barclay said that if he had that writer’s address, he would write to him, saying, not in anger, but in pity, “Your God is my devil.” He added, “The day my daughter was lost at sea there was sorrow in the heart of God (*Testament of Faith*, pp. 45-46).”

Indeed, there is sorrow in the heart of God whenever there is suffering. God does not cause bad things. As Rabbi Solomon said on a Wednesday night this past spring, any view of providence has to make sense in light of the Holocaust. If God directs every detail of human affairs, what did God have in mind with those gas chambers where 7 million men, women and children perished? That God is my devil!

The message of the best translation of Romans 8:28 is not that all things work together for good nor that God causes everything that happens, but that in everything, good and bad, God will be at work to bring something good. That is a word of comfort and assurance.

It means that when we experience the worst – when a loved one dies or a marriage fails, we lose a home or a job, the feared diagnosis is confirmed – God will be at work with us to bring something good out of the experience. God does not cause our suffering nor do the details of our suffering randomly move us to a better place. But God will work with us to find some window of hope.

The founding pastor in my previous setting lost his wife shortly before we moved there. They had a wonderful life together, so he was filled with grief. Shirley was 15 years younger, she had been through a divorce and was doing “O.K.” Then, we started seeing them together at social events, dancing at receptions. We knew something was up and finally I got a call to marry them on Thanksgiving. Jack was 85, they had cymbals clash when they kissed. It was the most joyful wedding I have done and they had 10 great years together. They never expected these years, but God was working for good even in the midst of their grief, God is always working for good. That is a word of assurance.

But there is more assurance in this part of our hotline to God, much more. Earlier in this passage from Romans 8, Paul says something extraordinary, something that is not repeated in scripture. He says that

when we are so weighed down with burdens that we don't even know how to pray, the Spirit intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words.

It is an amazing claim. It is an image of communication within the threefold personhood of the one true God. It is an image of the part of God who dwells within us and thus feels what we feel communicating that to the part of God beyond us, such that we can know that we are understood completely by the One who made us.

This may not seem like much, but it is. While we want things to change when we are hurting, what we want most of all is for someone to understand the depth of our pain. And often we worry about how God might respond to some of our feelings – feelings of anger and disappointment, frustration and alienation. According to Paul, God understands, we have nothing to worry about or hold back.

Most of us have been at some place in life where we did not know what to pray. Perhaps a few have been fortunate enough not to have been at such a place. I say “fortunate” and not “blessed” because the latter implies that we have been protected by God while others have not. God blesses all of us in different ways, but we need to be careful about how we use the language of blessing. Some of us may have been fortunate this far in life never to have reached a place where we were speechless in distress, but most of us have reached such a place.

I recall the response of the wife of a 50-year-old man in another setting who had just been diagnosed with a kind of cancer which meant he had just a few months. They had a 7-year-old son at the time. He told me before he told his wife. He didn't know how she would take it. She said almost nothing when he finally told her, she couldn't find the words. Even after he died, she talked mostly to her horses – animals are good listeners – she couldn't find words to express her feelings. But she felt plenty. It is comforting to think of the Spirit interceding for her.

I recall a mother who lost an adult daughter in a house fire. The daughter had many challenges. Some she created for herself, others she did not. Life had never been smooth and easy and then she died tragically. Her mother, an active member in the church I served, called me and we went to identify the body. At first, there was raw emotion - sadness, shock, despair. There were many tears. But after that, there

was silence. What do you say? What do you feel? What can you do, as a mother, after you have done all you could for 50 years? She was speechless. It is comforting to think of the Spirit interceding for her.

I recall my own experience of losing my mother with a cerebral aneurysm when she was 48. We were living 500 miles away, she had had no known significant health issues, the news was surreal. She lingered a few weeks and then she died. I am not often at a complete loss for words, as you know, but I couldn't express what I felt to God or anyone else. It is comforting to think of the Spirit interceding for me.

It is comforting to know that when the worst happens, God is still working to bring something good out of our experience. It also comforting to know that a part of God's own being whom we call Spirit intercedes for us, expresses what we cannot express and asks for what we need most deep down, even when we don't know what that is.

Then, there is one other bit of assurance that comes from this part of Holy Scripture, our hotline to God – Paul says that nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. In this magnificent chapter, which rivals 1 Corinthians 13 for Paul's best work, the Apostle asks the question, "Who will separate us from the love of Christ?" He first considers straightforward hardships like distress, persecution, famine, nakedness, peril and sword – the kind of things Paul faces in his own life. "No," he quickly concludes, "in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us."

Then, he says he is convinced that a long series of things will not be able to separate us from the love we know in Christ. This is not a random list of challenges. It reflects the worldview of Paul's time. Powers and principalities represent fallen angels, various forces in this world; height and depth refer to the position of stars in the sky; the meaning of life and death is clear. Paul is describing every part of creation and saying that none of this can separate us from God's love.

In his book *Who Needs God* Rabbi Harold Kushner includes a story about Jewish activist Anatoly Sharansky who was imprisoned for 15 years by the Soviet government on false charges of spying for the United States (pp. 177-178). Despite all efforts to break his spirit, he

survived his sentence and left prison stronger than he entered. When asked how he did this, he said he constantly reminded himself that the Power in him was stronger than the power that had imprisoned him.

He kept his faith. He lit Hanukkah candles, celebrated Passover and reminded himself that he was freer than his captors. When he wrote his autobiography, he chose the title *Fear No Evil* taken from the psalm he recited every day, the 23rd Psalm, which says that even when I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil, because thou art with me. In other words – nothing can separate me from God’s love.

That knowledge sustained Anatoly Sharansky through 15 years of hard labor in a Soviet prison. That knowledge, focused in distinctively Christian form, sustains us through all we face. Nothing in this life or the next can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. So, what do we have to fear? That is a word of comfort and assurance.

In *Cotton Patch Gospel*, a musical based on Clarence Jordan’s telling of the Gospel, there is a scene in which the Parable of the Good Samaritan is retold. The person in need has a car break down. Two religious parties stop and fail to offer any real help before the unlikely help finally arrives. But one of the religious parties is a Gospel quartet travelling in a tour bus. They cannot fix the vehicle, but they can sing a couple of songs to cheer up the poor soul - “Spitball Me, Lord, Over the Homeplate of Life” and “Ain’t No Busy Signals on the Hotline to God”.

I’m still waiting for Mary Alice to find choral arrangements for these two pieces... but all kidding aside, and realizing that these songs are intended to be humorous, there ain’t no busy signals on the hotline to God. Or with apologies to my mother, who was an English literature professor, there aren’t any busy signals on the hotline to God.

The phone may seem to ring for a while, God may be talking long before we are listening, but the hotline works. When we need help, we can find it in Holy Scripture, if we are patient and prayerful. In just the few verses we have considered today, we learn that God is always working for good, the Spirit intercedes for us when we don’t know how to pray and there is nothing that can separate us from God’s love. Even if this is all the assurance we ever hear, the hotline is working.