

One of my very favorite stories that I've told, oh, maybe a thousand times, is about a psychological experiment that was done in the 1950s, as the fictional story goes. The psychologists covered the floor of the two rooms, wall-to-wall, with manure. Then they got a couple of volunteers and put one young man alone in each of the rooms. They came back in a bit and checked on the young man in the first room. Understandably, the young man was very frustrated with being in a room full of stinky manure.

Then the psychologists checked on the second young man in the other room. Surprisingly, that young man was excitedly moving around the room, covering every inch of that room, scooping up the manure and then flinging it away, then moving on to another area of the room. The psychologists were amazed.

"What are you doing, running around and cheering like that?" they asked the second young man. "Don't you know that this room is filled with stinky manure?"

"Sure!" the young man replied. "But I figure there's so much manure in here, there's gotta be a pony in here somewhere!"

Well, now, have you had days, months, or even seasons in your life where it feels like you're kinda stranded in a room full of manure? Bless you if you haven't had that experience—yet—but real life is such that, sooner or later, you're going to get there sometime, somewhere.

But here's the deal. So much of a successful, thriving life in Christ is about mindset! Do you have a consistent mindset that "there's always a pony in there somewhere" ...? This mindset is one of the most immensely practical dimensions of our Christian walk, and it starts with the idea found in Romans 12:2. That's where the Apostle Paul wrote: "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect." That quote is from the ESV version of the Bible.

Now, this is really important. We can expect as Jesus-followers that we can be transformed by the renewal of our minds. But notice that this Bible passage is actually an instruction from God. That is, it requires our will to "not be conformed to this world" and to "be transformed" ...and the implied pronoun "you" is who Paul is addressing here.

So, how are *you* doing...have you changed your worldly habits to those of the Kingdom of God—following Jesus, expecting the best in every situation, because your mind has been renewed? You know, many Christians are taught that being "of this world" means abusing drugs or being immoral or something like that. But how about finding yourself in a tough situation full of manure-like circumstances and then not expecting God to have good things coming of that situation for you? Isn't that certainly worldly?

That brings us to Romans 8:28, one of the most practical, elegant, satisfying, and fulfilling verses in the Bible. Here's what Romans 8:28 says in the ESV: "And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose." Wow, all things work together for serious Christians who are called according to his purpose. And you know what that purpose is—loving God...and loving neighbors as yourself...and going forth to make disciples next door and around the world!

You see, we do indeed have a good Father in heaven, and God means for all circumstances we face to work together for good. So we can rest assured that, even when we are wallowing in a room full of life's manure, God is unfailingly working with us in that circumstance.

Now, we have all heard some well-meaning but snooty Christian who would rain on our God-given parade here. They say something like this: "God is not into that silly kind of thinking, you clown. You are immature in your thinking and it's going to cause you all kinds of heartbreak." But, you see, Romans 8:28 is really a

most elegant passage, blending two amazing givens of the Kingdom that God reveals in the Bible: God's sovereignty and our free will. So, here's a trail of thought about that.

First, Jesus died on the Cross, was resurrected, and ascended into heaven. The person who believes by faith in Jesus as Lord and Savior can completely rely on Christ's sovereign, finished work on the Cross—yes, God's grace is amazing, indeed! Of course, that fact should renew our mind completely, right there! Paul says that you and I have been transferred to the Kingdom of God—that's in Colossians 1:13—and that's designed to change our perspective, our mindset, our daily lives...forever. We should vigorously agree to that renewal, in the model of Romans 12:2.

Then, however, although we are anchored in that finished work of the Cross, as we live for Christ we are not exempt from the trials of life—indeed, God uses those trials as opportunity for our witness of a changed life. Now, to be sure, some trials that people experience are brought on by their own human weaknesses, misjudgments, and just plain sin. But other trials that people experience are brought on by the human weaknesses, misjudgments, and just plain sin of other people around them. You see, God lets the ramifications of the exercise of good ol' human free will impact our lives. Sure, we can avoid many trials by following Jesus, but because sin still exists in the world, Jesus also tells us we will be persecuted for our belief in Him.

But, you see, now comes the key. We have been equipped through the Word of God for an opportunistic response: we look for the pony! And we look for that pony because God has promised the believer who loves God that “all things work together for good for those called according to His purpose.” So, when you are in full-time ministry for the Lord in your workplace, whether that's a business, a nonprofit, or a church...well, then, you can be sure that God is *sovereign enough* in His working with you, no matter whether your free will caused the problem or not, so that all things will work together for good!

Does that mean that, in the end, it all works well for you? Of course! But what if you die, like Stephen did in the early church years as recorded in the book of Acts, when he was stoned to death as Saul of Tarsus looked on. Well, *yes*, think of the witness for Christ that Stephen displayed to Saul, who later became the Apostle Paul! But...*death*, you say? Really? Yes, the Apostle Paul, perhaps mindful of Stephen's witness right in front of him, later wrote that, “for me, to live is Christ and to die is gain!” That's in Philippians 1:21. Think of Stephen's sacrificial testimony to Paul—and then think of Paul's impact on all of us!

Now, the tallying of God's outcomes can be pretty tricky—sometimes, often early on, God seems to cloak just how He works it all together for good. But we can be sure of this: we will find out at the judgment seat of God just how He worked all of our trials for good, the all-encompassing promise of Romans 8:28. This, then, is the eternal perspective. Anchored in the finished work of the Cross, every event, every trial, every pile of stinky manure can be counted as something our Father in heaven will turn for good. Amazing!

Now, does that sound Biblically shallow to you? Too much superficial “positive thinking?” *To the contrary*, this understanding is practical and helpful for every nook and cranny of life and is among the most elegant and intricate of God's workings. By faith, we know Romans 8:28 to be utterly astounding and reliable.

The trick, then, is to truly change the habits of our minds. Are you and I trapped in the “thinking of this world,” that our situation is hopeless, perhaps that God is always just dispensing short-term justice with painful exactness and that He crafts no upside for His adopted, cherished, loved sons and daughters?

Or, like the young man in our story, are we expecting that there's a pony for the eventual discovering in every pile of manure we encounter in a bad season? Indeed, many stick-in-the-mud, dour Christians seem to prefer justice rather than joyful grace and mercy. May that not be so for you! So, renew your mind and affix your mindset now! Make it your ingrained habit to look for the pony, every time, everywhere!

A&A: Application & Action

1. Identify three stories in the Bible where God's good purposes seemed completely obscured to the participants in very difficult circumstances, yet God's good hand was ultimately revealed either to the participants or to us as readers of the Bible. Share these stories and outcomes with others.
2. Do you have a very difficult recent or current personal circumstance where God's good purposes still seem obscured? Work to explain that recent or current circumstance again in the context of Romans 8:28 and the Bible stories noted in Application #1. Then share your expectations for that personal circumstance.
3. Have you developed the habit of "expecting the pony" in every circumstance? If yes, explain your process for success. If no, what are you going to do to "renew your mind" and expectations in this vital area of the Christian life? Be detailed and specific.