

Our Redeemer Lutheran Church
Quincy, IL
Rev. David Mahsman

Pentecost 9
Saturday, July 29, 2023, at 5:00 p.m.
Sunday, July 30, 2023, at 9:00 a.m.

“You Can’t Lose”

Romans 8:28-30

Just over a week ago, someone in Los Angeles won a Powerball jackpot potentially worth more than one billion dollars. The odds of winning were close to one in 300 million—way more than the odds of being struck by lightning (one in 15,300).

So, whoever won the lottery is pretty lucky, wouldn’t you say? Or, maybe as Christians, we would say that person is greatly blessed.

Maybe; maybe not. I looked online for what happens to lottery winners. It seems that lots of them go broke in just a few years. One article I found says that a book titled *The Emotional Life of Money*, claims that “lottery winners frequently become estranged from family and friends. They also have a greater incidence of depression, drug and alcohol abuse, divorce, and suicide than the average person. Like losing all the money wasn’t already enough!”¹

So, even apparent winners can end up being losers.

I mention all this because today’s epistle lesson tells us that no matter what life brings your way as a Christian, bad or good,

¹ Money Marshmallow, “Why Do Lottery Winners Go Broke?” <https://moneymarshmallow.com/why-do-lottery-winners-go-broke/#:~:text=Accordingly%20to%20the%20book%20The,money%20wasn't%20already%20enough!>, accessed July 21, 2023.

You Can't Lose

I.

“And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose” (Rom. 8:28, ESV). Another translation (NIV) puts it this way: “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.”

No matter how the nuances of the Greek are translated, Paul tells us in no uncertain terms that God works with everything, no matter what, for our good.

But this passage could raise a couple of questions. How do we know that these words apply to us? And what does Paul mean by “good”?

Okay, first of all ... for whom does God work with everything for good? The text says “for those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.”

Be aware that Satan will try to tell you that this means the promise is not for you, even though it is.

Satan likes to twist God's Word. He did it to Eve. “Did God really say, ‘You must not eat from any tree in the garden’?” He did it to Jesus, challenging Him to jump from the temple, telling Jesus that the angels “will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.” And he does it with us: God works with all things for good “to those who love him,” Satan might tell us, but you don't really love Him. Or if you do, Satan will ask, do you love Him enough?

Satan tries to get us to take our eyes off of Jesus and to trust ourselves and our own efforts instead of trusting Jesus and what He has done for us. Satan

wants us to think that somehow, it's up to us ... that first we have to love God enough, only then will He work together with all things for our good.

Don't fall for Satan's lies—or for your own self-doubts. What it means to love God is to have God's gift of saving faith. We have nothing to do with it. It's all God's doing. The apostle John writes, "This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us.... We love because he first loved us" (1 John 4:10, 19).

Paul also shows us that our relationship with God is entirely God's doing. He writes, "For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified" (vv. 29-30).

God has loved you from eternity, from before He created you—that's what Paul means when he says that God "foreknew" you. Then he continues with the plan that God carried out on your behalf: Because He loved you, He also called you through the Gospel, brought you to faith, and justified you—declared you righteous on account of Christ—and so, as a result, will bring you to glory.

In the Small Catechism, Luther's explanation of the Third Article of the Apostles' Creed says, "I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to Him; but the Holy Spirit called me by the Gospel, enlightened me with His gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith."

That's what it means to be called according to God's purpose. And, since we have been called by the Gospel and believe it, we are by definition those who love God, no matter how imperfect our love may be.

And now, our heavenly Father promises to work with all things for our good.

But what is meant by "good"?

The ultimate good is to inherit eternal life. There is no greater good for us, and God works with all things to accomplish that.

Now, not everything that we might see as good will necessarily contribute to that ultimate good—*our* ultimate good. Winning the billion-dollar Powerball might lead us away from the crown of life rather than toward it, so that wouldn't be good. This verse shouldn't be understood as necessarily promising us material wealth or physical health. "Toward good" in the end means toward eternal life.

But I have to add that simply because our ultimate good is eternal life does not rule out God working with all things for other things we might consider to be "good" as well—including material blessings and good health. As we read in the Psalms:

"The eyes of all look to you,
and you give them their food in due season.

You open your hand;
you satisfy the desire of every living thing" (Ps. 145:15-16).

All good things come from God, who James, in his epistle, reminds us is the giver of every good and perfect gift (James 1:17).

II.

But what about bad things that happen to us? There are lots of bad things that can happen. Life can be tough. It can be painful. It can be heartbreaking.

The bad and painful things that can happen to us range from relatively minor annoyances in the big picture of things, to such serious matters as loss of a job, painful and life-threatening injuries, deadly diseases, death of a child or other loved one, and natural disasters like floods, tornados, and even record heat.

Some of the bad things we experience we bring on ourselves. Some are instigated by others. And some happen because we live in a world twisted and damaged by sin, what Paul calls creation's "bondage to corruption" (Rom. 8:21).

It doesn't matter how bad things happen to us, God still promises to work for our good.

In Genesis, we read about Joseph who was sold into slavery by his jealous brothers. Years later, after Joseph becomes Pharaoh's right-hand man in Egypt and saves the nation from starvation, his brothers show up. When they discover who Joseph is and what he has become, they plead for forgiveness. Joseph tells them, "As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today" (Gen. 50:20).

God works with bad things for our good, but he works with good things, too!

Many years ago, I was experiencing some angst after leaving my position with the Missouri Synod's communications department. I was trying to discern the Lord's will in regard to my next field of service. The Synod's mission board had called me to be assistant to the executive director. There was also a congregation in California that was talking to me about being their pastor.

What did God want me to do? I prayed about the situation, I gave it a lot of thought, and I talked to colleagues. One of those was Dr. Sam Nafzger, who was director of the Synod's Commission on Theology and Church Relations. Sam reminded me of Rom. 8:28: "And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose."

I had always thought about this passage chiefly with regard to times when bad things were happening. Was someone seriously ill? Did someone die? Am I out of work? God works together with all things for good.

But nothing bad was happening. I had one call and it looked like I was going to get another one. To most people this would be seen as a good thing.

Sam's point was that no matter which way I went, God would work with it for good. I couldn't lose.

"All things" means all things, he said ... not just bad things! Did you just win the lottery? God can work with that for good! Do you have a call? Accept the call or not, God will work with that for good.

Even when we sin, God can use that for good, as Paul writes, "where sin increased, grace abounded all the more" (Rom. 5:20). (We should be reminded, of course, that Paul adds in the next verse, "Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase? By no means!" But this doesn't negate his point that where sin abounds, grace abounds all the more ... and that God can work good even out of our sin.)

You can't lose.

God loves us. He calls us through the Gospel to faith in Jesus Christ. He promises to care for us and work for our good in all things.

Is something troubling you? Take it to the Lord in prayer, knowing that He will work in it for your good.

Is some sin weighing heavy upon you? Confess it to God, knowing that in Jesus Christ, He forgives you and can work even with your sin for your good.

Did you just win the lottery? Congratulations! God can use even that to bring you a blessing. In Jesus Christ, you can't lose. Amen.