

## SHAPED BY SCRIPTURE

### *God's Puzzling Kingdom*

Romans 8:18-30

July 6, 2025

I wouldn't call myself a "*dissectologist*"—that is, a person who has a passion for solving puzzles—although I do like puzzles. But a trip to Michigan in our family is just not complete without a card table brimming with 1,000 tiny, brightly colored puzzle pieces.

It's always a daunting project to put together a puzzle, but the reward is so sweet—the transformation of chaos and confusion into a beautiful picture, every piece fitting into its place. It's highly satisfying for a summer-vacation-dissectologist like me.

Puzzles are a family affair at our lake cottage, or most of the family at least, providing activity for a rainy day or a diversion from the beach. Everyone has their own technique. Some prefer the edges. Others sort by colors. One granddaughter has an eye for shape. For some in our family, it even becomes an obsession. As the puzzle begins to take shape, it gets more and more difficult to get up and walk away, to resist an opportunity to just finish a corner, or complete a section. "I'll be out to the beach in just a minute (or an hour!)." Or, "Just a few more pieces and I'll be up to bed."

In case you didn't know, puzzles pieces have names such as "whimsies," which are pieces cut into recognizable shapes like a cat or a car, "tabs" for pieces with parts that stick out, and "blanks," pieces for the tabs to fit into. Knobs and sockets, outies and innies—self-explanatory.

A puzzle speaks to our desire for wholeness and completion, to see all the pieces fit neatly together to form a picture, to bring meaning to all those individual shapes when the last piece snaps into place. Now we see the big picture and it all makes sense.

God too must desire that sense of completion. He is a God of order after all. The Master Dissectologist is, and has been,

working on a master puzzle throughout time, arranging all the pieces that, together, will reflect his picture of a restored and glorious kingdom.

It is quite comforting to know that each of God's puzzle pieces (that's us), has a place in time, with a job to do that fulfills a purpose—that there is meaning to the even sometimes chaos and suffering that are part of our lives.

Paul has a lot he wants to convey to the Roman Church in his letter and in this passage. In just a few sentences, we learn about prayer, trust in God, the Spirit, God's plans for us and for his creation, and the difficult subject of Christian suffering and how that fits into God's plans. Too much for one sermon. But toward the end of it lies my favorite and oft-quoted line: "We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose."

When Chris invited us to select a passage that has been meaningful to us for a sermon this summer, I knew immediately which one I would choose: Romans 8:28. This line of Scripture has provided comfort and encouragement when things aren't going as planned in my life, and I have quoted it to others to do the same. I thought it said something along the line of "our lives are puzzles that God will arrange into a pretty picture, making sense and providing meaning out of the bad things that happen to us."

But an important Bible lesson to remember is always to be wary of taking a sentence or line from Scripture without fully considering its context. It is so easy to make a sentence or phrase fit our own purpose. So what is the context here?

Paul is addressing the issue of suffering to the young Christian church in Rome, which is experiencing hardship, and asking questions that we still ask today. What has

suffering got to do with faith? And why, if Jesus-followers are God's beloved, do we suffer?

The Roman church was comprised mostly of Gentiles, but Gentiles who were faithful students of Hebrew Scripture. The Roman Christians were outliers in Rome, small, criticized and harassed on all sides: by the Jewish community for their beliefs, and ostracized from Gentile friends and families for the same. The suffering of which Paul speaks here is Christian suffering, suffering for the sake of Christ—criticism, ridicule, the threat (or reality) of political or physical harm—for living as followers of Jesus.

Most of us, in the freedoms that we have just celebrated this weekend, have not had to suffer much for our faith, but around the world many Christians still do. But even here, sometimes within our own circles of family and friends, we feel the push and pull of our faith and the world, the awkwardness of sometimes being out of step with everyone else's priorities. The more out of step we are, the more we may feel the pressure. Paul reminds us that these sufferings are temporary and inconsequential when compared to our future glory. All things will finally resolve themselves for good in God's Grand Plan.

Paul tells us in this passage that when God is at the center of our lives, we have hope, and that hope exhibits itself as patience, peace, and courage, because we are confident that God will eventually put all the pieces together in their proper order and set things right. In Paul's teaching, it is our joy to work together with God for the creation of his kingdom.

So God (thank God), has a plan. Left to our own devices as human beings, we are almost certain to make a mess of things because of our human natures. In fact, we already have, from the misuse of God-given resources, to poor decisions we've made in our lives with bad consequences, to historical tragedies like the Crusades and slavery.

Humans just tend to make a mess of things. Paul says not only to quit worrying about our messes and challenges, but to rejoice in them. Whatever our suffering for Christ, our salvation is assured. We can be certain of our redemption, because it is a gift from God and nothing to do with our own efforts.

Even Creation waits with eager anticipation. Paul reminds us that indeed, we have already been given a foretaste of our future through the gift of the Holy Spirit. Redemption is God's powerful loving act through Christ.

It can be the little things in life that catch us up sometimes. There can be a world of difference between two small decisions, or two small opportunities, or two little words. In this case, between the words "for" and "with."

In the translation of Romans 8:28 I read, the word "for" is used and is the one used in many other translations. It sounds, with that word, as if Paul is saying that God is working through all things in our lives, good and bad, for our benefit. "We know that all things work together for good *for* those who love God, who are called according to his purpose."

But the more accurate translation is actually "with." "We know that all things work together for good *with* those who love God, who are called according to his purpose," meaning that we, as Jesus-followers, are to work in partnership with God to help bring forth goodness and the redemption of Creation. Two small words.

We heard this morning that the Israelites in Egypt had God with them in their sufferings, and so did the Roman Christians who faithfully studied that very story in Jewish Scripture. But the "with" of Paul's letter was perhaps something they hadn't considered. Moses—who had to ask God if he was really sure that he wanted him, Moses, to approach Pharaoh and lead the Israelites out of Egypt—seemed a bit surprised. Maybe the Romans were too.

God called Moses. God calls each of us.

The plan is God's, but the building of the puzzle, the means by which God will bring all Creation, including us, to wholeness and completion, is a partnership thing. As Jesus-followers, we must follow him and be like him.

The "with us" translation is very Paul, and fits well in his teachings. We, God's children, are not given a free ride but are to work with God for the building of God's kingdom, to do good, to love one another, to have compassion, to be generous, to follow Christ in our daily lives, for the goodness

of God's creation, to help bring in God's Kingdom that has already been set in motion.

"One of the frustrations of being an elderly exegete, is to find the text refusing to say what you thought it said sixty years ago," writes Theologian and scholar N.T. Wright. "I understood the Romans 8:28 [text] to be saying that the multiple disparate elements of life would sort themselves out, under God's benevolent guiding, like a sort of automatic jigsaw puzzle. It might look chaotic, but a happy picture would emerge from it all."

When I first read this, I was crushed. But then, I must admit that I felt a little bit vindicated. Even a noted scholar can slip up every once in a while. So, when I fall and break my wrist a week before our long-planned cruise, when a job is lost and the mortgage is due, when a devastating diagnosis is received, when we look around and see injustice and suffering in our world and neighborhoods—does this passage say that God isn't with us? No. Not at all.

For we as children of God know in our hearts and from Scripture that God is always for us, with us, and in us, through the Spirit. We have each experienced God's abiding presence in our lives. But, "all things work together for good with those who love him" doesn't give us the privilege we want, that everything in our lives will work together the way we want them to.

Our thousand pieces of good and bad decisions, our dramas, tragedies, joys, loves and losses, bad and good things done by us, for us, and to us, form our puzzle piece, but in partnership with God, God molds them to fit perfectly into His Grand Puzzle, building piece by piece, toward his glorious redemption of creation and each of us.

God collaborates with those who love him—that's us. "Those who love him" are special to God, each called according to his purpose, which is to grow and develop into the image of his Son. God is our co-laborer in the world as we work together with him for good.

God "with us" or God "for us" isn't mutually exclusive. It isn't an either/or situation. It's (praise God) a both/and.

"What then are we to say about these things," says Paul in verse 31. "If God is for us, who is against us?" Indeed. Thanks be to God.

God works with us in our efforts to follow Christ. After all, his wisdom, power, and courage are needed, and He is for us throughout our lives. Even though the passage does not say exactly what I assumed it said, you don't have to be very far along in life to be able to look backwards and see the hand of God at work. God often brings goodness out of a time of suffering and trial. Theologian, writer, and priest Richard Rohrer says that God spins gold out of the straw of our lives.

Years ago, during a rough patch in my marriage, when I felt my life had fallen apart into a million pieces, I was in the straw. But the Spirit encouraged me and provided hope, heard only in my heart. A decision to work through it all, to have patience, to forgive, and to give grace to one another, is a redemption story for our family, for our relationships with God, and working with God, has provided opportunities to encourage and provide hope to others. It is a both/and story, a true work of God's puzzleology. God is the one at the wheel, spinning gold from straw.

We all have stories, and challenges. As a friend of mine says, "Life be lifin," meaning life has a way of throwing you some hardballs, providing some detours that were not in your plans for your perfect life. The good, the bad and the ugly of our lives are, however, all part of our life puzzle piece and uniquely form the way we fit into God's plans.

One of the most famous redemption stories may be the one that Susan read today: the redeeming of God's people from slavery to freedom. Lives transformed, a new history written, carried out in partnership with God's chosen people. God is working in our lives for good. God is working with us through our efforts for the good of the world.

I am a fan of Mr. Rogers, ever since our children were small. They were entranced, and so was I, even more so when I learned about his life. Fred, an ordained Presbyterian pastor, was the first to recognize that "the space between the tv and the viewer was holy ground" and that it could be a tool to talk to children on their level about love. He was a faithful, wise and courageous man of God who walked out of sync

with most of the world. He took a different path in life—one for which he was criticized and misunderstood, but a life *with and through* God, one in which he used his talents and resources to work with God, helping to create more sensitive and caring children and adults. He told us to look for the helpers, the ones who come out in a crisis and work with God.

"We know that with those who love God, he collaborates for good," N.T. Wright translates Verse 28. Those who love God have the Spirit, and the Spirit is acting in them, in us, for good. God, in God's wisdom, designed the world so that its puzzle pieces through time, would fall together according to his plan. The world is moving toward his goal through those who love him and work with him.

"With us" is our calling, our vocation, but God is also "for us." That too is part of God's plan. And because we are in God's hands, all things finally resolve for good—for creation and for us.

So where are we today in the scheme of God's plans? Only God knows of course. God's plan was to create a Messiah-shaped people through whom he would do what had to be done. In the lives and prayers of the faithful, God's plan is underway. We live in the in-between time, between generations of the faithful, the "already" and "not yet" of the new age, initiated, but not yet fully here. As God shapes our individual puzzle pieces, he smooths over the corners, and shapes our tabs and blanks, to make us a perfect fit.

In the meantime, we wait in hope for what is yet to come. We wait with patient endurance, steadfastness and perseverance for the final picture to emerge. But we are not to wait idly by—we are to make ourselves known by how we love, live, give, and serve.

Without our individual puzzle pieces, the puzzle is not complete, and we deprive the world of the hope that emerges when we share our lives and our resources. With our quirky, crazy whimsies, innies and outies, we show the world what God has done for us, which motivates us, and then we inspire those we meet who hear our stories, to learn God's story.

There must be no greater frustration for a true dissectologist like God than a puzzle with a missing piece. Amen.