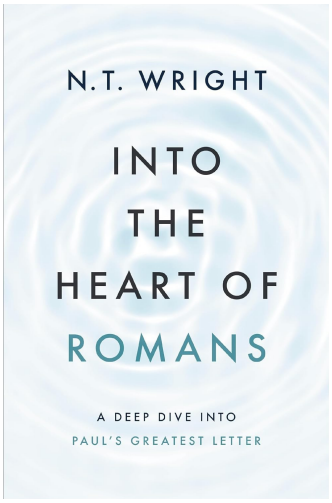
Excerpt Page from N.T. Wright
Proper 12A — July 26, 2026

Excerpt from N.T. Wright's Into the Heart of Romans *(Zondervan, 2023), pages 161, 163, 166-67, 168, 174. Today's excerpt focuses on the proper translation of verse 28 of Romans 8. Here's the familiar translation from the NRSV and N.T Wright's translation:*

NRSV: We know that *all things* work together for good *for* those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.
N.T. Wright: We know, in fact, that *God* works all things together for good *with* those who love him, who are called according to his purpose.

Quite different, right? The two crucial differences are that (1) "all things" is the subject of the verb "work" in the NRSV and "God" is doing the work in N.T. Wright's translation; and (2) the work is done "for" those who love God in the NRSV and "with" those who love God in Wright's. The Greek verb synergeō *is the word "with,"* syn, *and the word "work,"* ergeō, *meaning "work with." Wright explains why this verb caused problems for Protestant theology, probably then leading to the inaccurate translation in the NRSV — followed by his positive argument about what verse 28 really means.*



Why hasn't [the translation] all been sorted out long ago? Well, protestant theologians have always, quite rightly, worried about **synergism** [an English word directly from the Greek verb], that is, the idea that people get saved as the result of a combined effort, from God on the one hand and the believer on the other. In classic 'synergism', God does his bit, we do ours, and together we accomplish salvation. Not so, we hear in a thundering chorus from everyone from Martin Luther to John Piper: salvation is God's work from first to last! All we have to do is trust! Any suggestion that we *contribute* in any way, let alone *collaborate*, is strictly ruled out.

But the point is that here — as in the other places where he uses the word [1 Cor 3:9 and 2 Cor 6:1] — Paul is not after all speaking about *how salvation is accomplished*. Assurance of salvation is indeed based, throughout Romans, on the sovereign love of God poured out in the death of his son. But this passage, Romans 8.18-30, is speaking about the *vocation* of the saved community, the calling to *implement* the already-*accomplished* work of Jesus the Messiah within and for the benefit of the wider world of all creation. The way this happens, as we saw in our previous chapter, is through the spirit calling Jesus' followers to be people of prayer at the heart of the pain of the world. . . .

All this means that western Christians have some unlearning to do, as well as some fresh learning. Ever since the Middle Ages, the western church has been fixated on how to get to heaven and avoid hell, and how to be sure that one is on the right path. The result is that the church has read all its key texts as though this was what they 'must have been' talking about. But, as Israel's prophets would tell you (thinking for instance of Isaiah 40-55), salvation is not simply God's gift to his people, it is God's gift *through* his people — to the wider world. . . .

The upshot of verse 28, then, exactly in line with what we've seen in verses, 18 to 27, is to do with God's overall purpose when he calls people to believe the gospel and follow Jesus. God's loving call of Jesus' followers, Jew and gentile alike, was not aimed at helping them to escape this world and go and live with him somewhere else. The purpose was so that, in rescuing them from sin

and death, God would manifest his glory *through them*, not least through their suffering and prayer. God's purposes are going ahead, and he recruits — that is, he calls — human beings to share in those purposes, as Genesis 1 always indicated he would do.

This is where Paul's theme of assurance comes into its own. We need to think of the little Roman house-churches, squashed into someone's tenement attic or the small room behind a shop, anxious about other Jesus-followers in town who do some key things differently, fearful of the all pervasive and socially coercive paganism, particularly the Caesar-worship that's become all the rage. At this point in Rome, a city of around a million people, there were perhaps a couple of hundred Jesus-followers. They were a tiny micro-minority: But already they were known as trouble-makers,.. as a dangerous, subversive, disruptive little clique. And Paul's doctrine of assurance was not simply that they would go to heaven when they died — though of course he believed that at death they would be 'with the Messiah', and that the spirit would then give them new bodily life in the final resurrection. His doctrine of assurance was to confirm that they, the Jesus-believing messianic people, were in fact the true people of the creator God, a*nd that God was being glorified and would be glorified through their suffering and prayerful witness, even in the present time. . . .*

Part of our problem is that those who thought they spoke and acted for God in the sixteenth century, as in many other centuries, tried to implement that vocation in the usual worldly way, by force of arms. But, as Jesus insisted, God's kingdom goes forwards in the ways set out in the Sermon on the Mount, in peacemaking, in justice-bringing, in mourning over the world's ills, in meekness, purity of heart and so on. That's what 'ruling' looks like now. And it begins, in the present time, with the inarticulate and anguished prayer that Paul describes in Romans 8.26-7 — the prayer of those who are indwelt by the spirit, caught up in the love of God for his suffering world.

Thus Paul is assuring the Messiah-followers in Rome that they are in fact the people through whom the creator God will work out his purposes of new creation, and through whom this God *is already working them out*. How easy it was, some centuries later, for some in the church to imagine that this meant Jesus' followers holding ordinary worldly power, and for others to react by pushing the whole thing away to a distant 'heaven'. But the abuse doesn't take away the use. From the Sermon on the Mount onwards, Jesus' promises that the meek would inherit the earth, that the poor in spirit would inherit God's kingdom on earth as in heaven, meant what they said. Romans 8 is one of the most vivid applications of the same point. *God is working all things for good with and through those who love him, who are called according to his purpose. . . .*

I have suggested that this short passage, verses 28-30, is basically Servant-theology, focused on Jesus and then opening up to include all his people. Up to now in chapter 8, we have seen the mystery in which suffering seems to be not only something God's people will have to go through but something *as a result of which* God's purposes will come to birth. Of all the biblical roots for such an idea, Isaiah 40-55 stands out, not least because that's where Paul will go explicitly in verses 32 to 35. And, at the heart of our present passage, he speaks of being conformed to the image of the son, the representative of God's people, firstborn of a large family. All this says to me that Paul is thinking here of Isaiah 40-55, and especially the Servant-songs upon which he based his amazing Jesus-poem, likewise replete with Adamic references, in Philippians 2. That is why I am encouraged to read this otherwise difficult passage in the light of Isaiah, and to see the language that has commonly been taken to refer to 'predestination to salvation', generating well-known puzzles from Augustine to Calvin and beyond, in terms instead of the purposes of God *through* his people for the world. 'You are my servant, Israel, in whom I will be *glorified*.'

Bottom line: God needs us, who are already being saved, to be servants in God's project of bringing salvation to the rest of the world. In a sense, being saved means to be called and sent.