

## **Adoption**

### **God's Care for His Children**

By [Derek Thomas](#)

#### **Romans 8:26-39**

Turn with me now to Romans chapter 8, Romans chapter 8, a section of Scripture that is probably one of the most well-known, favorite passages, I'm sure, to many of you. We'll pick it up at verse 26. Romans 8:26:

In the same way the Spirit also helps our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we should, but the Spirit Himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words; and He who searches the hearts knows what the mind of the Spirit is, because He intercedes for the saints according to the will of God. And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose. For those whom He foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son, so that He would be the firstborn among many brethren; and these whom He predestined, He also called; and these whom He called, He also justified; and these whom He justified, He also glorified. What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him over for us all, how will He not also with Him freely give us all things? Who will bring a charge against God's elect? God is the one who justifies; who is the one who condemns? Christ Jesus is He who died, yes, rather who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who also intercedes for us. Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? Just as it is written, "FOR YOUR SAKE WE ARE BEING PUT TO DEATH ALL DAY LONG; WE WERE CONSIDERED AS SHEEP TO BE SLAUGHTERED." But in all these things we overwhelmingly conquer through Him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing, will be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Amen. May God add His blessing to the reading of His holy and inerrant word.

We are coming to the end of our consideration together this fall of the doctrine of

adoption, or sonship, that God in His grace has brought us into a relationship with Himself whereby God is our Father, Christ is our Elder Brother, and the Holy Spirit is, as Paul refers to him in this eighth chapter of Romans, “the spirit of adoption,” the spirit of sonship. We’ve seen together some of the implications of that doctrine in terms of our communion with each other. We’re brought into a family, with brothers and sisters and obligations that accrue as a result: we’re to love one another and serve one another. We’ve seen something of the way in which God has brought us into a family and therefore, in a sense, matriculated us. Taking a line from what Paul says in Galatians, that we are “no longer under the Law,” in the sense that we no longer live under tutors and guardians as was paramount under the old covenant; we are members of the new covenant. And as such, we see and are given larger blessings than some of our brothers and sisters under the old covenant. We have the freedom of the house and the run of the house.

And tonight I want us to return again to this magnificent eighth chapter of Romans and to something now that Paul says in verse 29, “Those whom He foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son.” That’s God’s goal and purpose: to make us like Jesus. And then you notice what Paul says, “In order that He (that is, Jesus) would be the firstborn...” the one of pre-eminence, that is to say “among many brothers. Isn’t that a beautiful picture? Jesus and His brothers? Jesus and His family? Jesus and His spiritual siblings? You and I, that is, who by grace have been brought into fellowship and union with Christ.

Now let’s look at the context in which Paul says this because what Paul wants us, of course, to see and be encouraged by here in the closing verses of Romans 8 is that God intends to bring all of us home. *He intends to bring all of us home.* It is said that John Knox, when he was dying, asked his wife to bring him his Bible, and at this point in Knox’s life he was unable to see. And he asked her to open the Scriptures. “To what chapter?” she said. “To the eighth chapter of Romans.” And he wished his fingers to be placed on these closing verses of Romans 8 because in them was all of his certainty and all of his hope and all of his assurance. Paul is dealing here with the adequacy of the grace of God to deal with every contingency in life. And Paul is arranged over the way in which the Holy Spirit witnesses with our spirits that we are the children of God, that we are heirs of God and joint heirs with Jesus Christ, that we cry, “Abba, Father”; that there are times in the depth of our perplexity and trial when we know not what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit makes sighs and groans too deep for words, helps us in our infirmities, prays along with us, sustains us, keeps us. And now in verse 28 and the verses that follow, Paul wants us to understand and to appreciate that God is determined to bring us all the way home, that Jesus might be “the firstborn among many brothers.”

## **I. Everything that happens to us happens according to God's plan — God**

**has a purpose.**

Let's think along three lines of thought here. First of all, that there is a purpose to God's work. There is a purpose. We know that for those who love God all things to "work together for good...for those who are called according to His purpose." There is a purpose in what God is doing. God is working and superintending everything on behalf of His children: those whom He loves, those whom He adores, those whom He cherishes. That everything that happens, happens according to this purpose, this plan. Paul is thinking here of the control of God, the sovereignty of God over everything: over time and space, over your life and mine, over every contingency. That things happen, things occur because God wills them to happen, because God is executing His plan, because God is working out His decree. That the future is known to Him, just as the past is known to Him, just as the present is known to Him. There is no plan B in the purposes of God. There is no second-rate plan that God has to hurriedly bring into execution because the first plan has failed. God has a plan. God has a purpose. That's what theologians call "the decree of God." It's what *The Westminster Confession* elaborates on in wonderful and extraordinary detail, in chapter three of *The Confession*.

It unfolds in space and time by means of a covenant. God makes a covenant. You see it in the Garden of Eden. You see that promise that God makes to Adam and Eve: that from the seed of the woman would come One who would crush the very head of Satan. There's God's plan. There's His purpose—it's a part of His purpose. You see God singling out Abraham from Ur of the Chaldeans and giving Him a glimpse of His plan and His purpose that from Him would issue a seed as great as the night sky and the sand upon the seashore. *God has a plan. God has a purpose.* You see him raising up someone like Moses in the midst of Pharaoh's Egypt that He might bring His people out of bondage in order that they might worship Him. You see Him raising up King David, and with King David reiterating that plan and that purpose and that covenant: that he would be the forerunner, the king that would signal the coming of the King of Kings and Lord of Lords.

His plan is wise; every aspect of it is respondent of the wisdom of God, because it's God's plan. God adapts means to ends. He sets targets, orchestrates forces that are too complex even for us to imagine and talk about. And all of history—imagine it, my friend, that all of history has been part of the execution of God's plan to bring you to this point in this building tonight. It's all part of God's plan. It's all part of God's decree. It embraces everything, everything. "All things," Paul says, not just the good things, not just the happy things, not just the pleasant things. Praise God for the happy things. Praise God for the times of laughter and joy. Praise God for those precious moments when joy fills our hearts and we, as it were, in the words of the 23rd Psalm, 'lie down beside still waters and our cup overflows, and we're conscious of goodness and mercy following us all the days of our lives.' Thank God for those days.

But there are days of trial too and days of difficulty and days of sorrow and days of bereavement and days of loss. And Paul says, 'Those things are part of God's plan too...all things...all the happenstances.' Don't you love it when Calvinists and Presbyterians talk about happenstances and chance and luck?

I love that verse in the Old Testament describing the death of King Ahab. "And a certain man drew a bow at a venture." Ahab's in a chariot and dressed in ordinary, civilian clothing. He's got some armor on, and the arrow catches him in the joints of the armor. And he's taken out of the chariot, and he leans up against a tree, and he's dead. It was just a random, a "lucky" shot. But it was all part of the execution of the plan of God. It was all part of the purposes of God.

You see, my friend, if you don't believe that it leads to despair. Oh, there are theologians and books coming out by the truckloads suggesting something quite different to all of that: that God doesn't know the future, that the future is open to Him, that God orders some things but not everything. What a recipe for despair! That I can drive up I-55 tonight at 7:30 with "Jesus driving furiously" in every lane, like maniacs, not concerned about their own lives and least of all about mine, and to be able to say a little prayer—and if you've never said a little prayer when you're driving up I-55, you're a different person than I am—and to know that everything, everything, absolutely everything falls beneath the canopy of and embrace of the decree and plan and purpose of God. What a glory that gives to a sense of our direction in life. That life isn't meaningless. That life isn't vanity. There's a purpose to life. That life can be full. That coming to know Christ and knowing His word and hiding it within our hearts and seeking to live before it brings a fullness and a sense of "peace that passes all understanding," knowing that we walk in His ways, and that He leads us and He guides us and He directs our paths. "How shall a young man learn to direct His paths? By taking heed thereunto according to Thy word." There is a purpose. There is a plan, and it's comprehensive, and it embraces everything. There is a purpose in God's work.

## **II. There is a fullness in God's work — His plan is absolutely complete.**

Secondly, there is a fullness in God's work. There is a fullness in God's work. Five great truths the apostle now singles out. He puts it like this: In verse 29, he introduces the idea of foreknowledge and then, of course, in verse 30 he continues the idea—foreknowledge and predestination and calling and justification and glorification.

He begins with *foreknowledge*. It's not *what* God knew that Paul is concerned about here. He's not saying that God knew a lot of facts. That's true, of course, but that's not what he's thinking about. It's *whom* did God know? And He knew you, my friend: you who trust in Jesus, you whose faith is in Jesus, you who come tonight with empty hands and say, "Nothing in my hands I bring, simply to Thy cross I cling." God foreknew you. Paul isn't saying that God foreknew that

you would choose Jesus. You know, people get all hung up about things like that. That's not what Paul is talking about. He's saying, 'He foreknew *you!*' "For those whom He foreknew"—however you have it in your translation. And the emphasis is on the person. God has known us for a long time.

I'm often asked in my position at the seminary to write testimonials. I don't know what possesses these students to recommend me as someone to give them a testimonial for their future lives and prosperity, but they often do. And one of the questions that I'm often asked is, "How long have you known this candidate?" And I have to be honest. In most cases, I've only known them for three or four years at most. God has known us forever. God knew us before we were born. God knew us before the creation of the world. And you understand, of course, that in the Bible 'to know' is a very intimate word. When Adam *knew* his wife, Eve, it's very intimate word. And God foreknew you. He set His love upon you; He set His affection upon you.

"Those whom He foreknew, He also *predestined*"—ah, there's the word. That God has determined a person's destiny beforehand. That's not to say that you don't make decisions, and that you don't choose. I chose Christ. Yes, it was an act of my will. I can tell you the time and the date. It was December the 28th, 1971. It was 11:30 pm, approximately at night. I can tell you that. I was conscious of the exercise of my own volition in choosing Christ; saying "No" to a past existence in a past world. Yes, I chose Him. But He determined that I would choose Him. It was not I that chose; it was He that chose through me. He made me willing. He drew my affections.

You see, take prayer. When you give thanks for your conversion. You're a Christian tonight; you're a believer; you're trusting Jesus Christ, and you're giving thanks to God for your salvation. Now, has anyone here ever gotten on their knees and said something like this: "Lord, I just want to take this opportunity to thank myself for being so wise in choosing You. You know, Lord, I know I should give You all the glory, but, you know, I really did good," as you say ungrammatically, "I really did well when I chose Jesus." No, there isn't anyone in here who's prayed a prayer like that. When you are praying for the conversion of your brother or your mother or your children...some of us have prayed prayers like that for over thirty years. I've never, ever prayed, "Lord, Lord, I want them to be able to do it all by themselves, unaided by any sort of interference of your part." No, you don't pray prayers like that. You say, "Lord, save them because they cannot save themselves." Isn't that what you pray?

By the way, my friends, shouldn't that be the burden of our prayer meeting here on Wednesday night. We need to shake ourselves and make use of this time of prayer more than we do, and to pray for the lost and perishing, that God in His sovereign power would intervene and raise like Lazarus from the dead. You know, predestination only makes sense when you're a Christian. There's no point in talking about predestination to somebody who isn't a Christian. You're wasting

your time and your breath. "It's a family secret," as Calvin says.

And then, calling...foreknowledge, predestination, *calling*...God called us. Now there are two kinds of call: there is an external call—there's a general call, a universal call—and there's an effectual call, a special call. You know, you are too polite to do it here, but imagine, imagine you're in a parking lot and you're sitting in your car and you saw someone twenty, thirty, forty yards away. And you don't have manual windows anymore; you all have these little buttons and you press it and the window goes down and you shout, "John!" Well, of course, if there's more than one John, you know, several people may turn around, but let's imagine there's only one John there. Everybody hears that call. Some of them will think, "How rude." But John will turn around and if he recognizes you, he'll probably come in your direction and say, "Hello" and "How are you?" and "How nice to see you."

It's what Jesus did, wasn't it, at the tomb of Lazarus? That's the great illustration of an effectual call. You know, Matthew Henry said, "Jesus had to say, '*Lazarus*, come forth!' You know, had he simply said, 'Come forth!' all the dead would have come forth. He had to specify Lazarus in order to make sure that it would be Lazarus, and only Lazarus, that would come forth."

And *justified*...foreknowledge, predestination, calling, and justification... 'All those whom God foreknew, He predestines; and all those whom He predestines, He calls; and all those whom He calls, He justifies'—He makes us right with God on the basis of the finished work of another, a substitute, a sin-bearer, our divine Messiah, Jesus. We come with nothing in our hands and we grasp Him and Him alone. "God made Him to be sin for us who knew no sin, that we might be reckoned the righteousness of God in Him." Justified, acquitted, so that on the Day of Judgment we might here no word of condemnation for all of our sins and all of our guilt, because Jesus has taken it for us. This legal term that declared us to be right with God on the basis of the substitutionary work of Jesus.

Donald Gray Barnhouse has this wonderful illustration of substitution. He says, "Imagine being Barabbas, in the cell at the time of Jesus' arrest and trial, and he overhears the shouting of the crowd but doesn't hear what Pilate is saying. All he can hear from his cell are the words, 'Crucify! Crucify!' And there's a rattle of keys and the prison door is opened and Barabbas is called, and he thinks he's going to be executed, and he's told, 'You're free.' And Jesus is taken out and executed instead." Do you think Barabbas understood substitution? Do you think for Barabbas it was some kind of legal fiction? I tell you it was about as real as anything can be, that his life had been spared because another had been taken in his room and in his stead and in his place.

And that fifth, glorious word...yes, *glorified*. And you say, "But I'm not yet glorified," and you're not. And some of you are definitely not. But, you see, for the apostle it is so certain that it will occur that he puts it as though it already has,

because there is an exorability about the purpose of God and there is a fullness to the work of God. Because 'those whom He foreknows, He predestines; and those whom He predestines, He calls; and those whom He calls, He justifies; and those whom He justifies, He glorifies.' "The soul that on Jesus has leaned for repose, / I will not, / *will not* desert to His foes. That soul though all Hell should endeavor to shake, / I'll never! No, never! No, never forsake!"

### **III. The harmony of God's work — He works all things together for good.**

There's a purpose to the work of God, and there's a fullness to the work of God, and there's a harmony to the work of God. Do you notice that little word? It's such a beautiful word in verse 28. "God works all things together for good." Yes, for good. You see, it's all very well to talk about predestination and justification and glorification, but the reality is that my life is in a mess. The reality is that I'm passing through trials and tribulations and difficulties, and I'm at the point and I'm on the verge of questioning whether this purpose exists. And Paul says, 'Oh, yes, it exists, and I want you to know it is good.' It's what Joseph came to see when his brothers had abandoned him and sold him into slavery to a band of Midianites, when he had been falsely accused of rape. Imagine: imprisoned, left in prison. And then that glorious revelation, epiphany to his brothers in chapter 50 of Genesis, "You meant it for evil, but God meant it for good." It's what Job said to his wife, wasn't it? "Shall we not accept good at the hands of God and not evil?" All things, all things—even the bad things, even the evil things are part of the plan and purpose of God for my good.

"God moves in a mysterious way, His wonders to perform. / He plants His footsteps in the sea, and rides upon the storm. Deep in unfathomable minds of never failing skill, He treasures up His bright designs and works His sovereign will. / Blind unbelief is sure to err and scan His work in vain, God is His own interpreter and He will make it plain."

And you say, "But that's poetry...and beautiful poetry. Prove to me that the trial that I'm passing through now is part of the good purpose of God to bring me as a child of God, as an adopted child of God, and conform me to the image of Christ that He might be the firstborn among many brothers. Prove to me."

And I say to you, go to the book of Revelation, and what do you see in those opening chapters, and in the very opening chapter and again in chapter four and five? What do you see? You see a vision of the sovereignty of Jesus, and He's sitting upon a throne. And what is that saying? It's saying that the One who's in control, the One who has all sovereignty, is Jesus. Nothing ever happens to you outside of the decree and purposes of Jesus. There is nothing un-Jesus-like that every happens to you. Are there crosses? Yes. There were crosses for Him. Through many tribulations we enter the kingdom of God. But there's a harmony to what God does. You may not be able to comprehend it now. You may not be

able to see it all now. You may not be able to put all the pieces together. You may be hovering at ten thousand feet and there are clouds at fifteen thousand feet, but you know every time you fly to Atlanta, and you fly at thirty or thirty-three thousand feet, you see the sun shining. No matter what's happening below you, the sun is always shining above the clouds, always.

And that's the promise. That's the assurance. That's the word, Paul says, and it is true for every child of God. That's what it means to have the spirit of adoption indwelling us, to have a certainty that whatever is happening to us is happening as the outworking of the good purposes of God. He's determined to bring you home. "In My Father's house are many mansions. And if it were not so, I would've told you. I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go to prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you unto Myself, that where I am there," there, "you will be also." Let's pray together.

*Our Father in Heaven, we thank You for Your words. Thank You for this wonderful reassurance of Your sovereign purposes and good purposes. Thank You for this glorious vision that we shall be in the family of God with Jesus as the first born and pre-eminent one, the forerunner of our faith. What inestimable privileges are ours. Help us to treasure them and uphold and strengthen our brothers and sisters who are passing through the Valley of the Shadow of Death. Lift those hands which hang down and those feeble knees and help us to run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus the Author and the Finisher of our faith. Hear us for Jesus' sake. Amen.*

Please stand. Receive the Lord's benediction. Grace, mercy, and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ be with you all. Amen.

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