

Romans: The Purpose of God

Romans 8:28-30

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If you have your Bibles, I'd invite you turn with me to Romans, chapter 8. Romans, chapters 6 through 8 tell us what it looks like to live in the grace of God. What grace looks like in the life of a believer. And it doesn't tell us that grace means that there is no suffering and pain in the Christian life. It doesn't tell us that there are no challenges in the Christian life. It doesn't tell us that there is miracle after miracle in the Christian life and success upon success. But it does tell us that the work of the Spirit is real, and that God is in the midst of us doing His business of conforming us to Jesus Christ. There is struggle with sin, there is struggle within, there's persecution, there's trial, and in all these things we are more than conquerors.

In Romans, chapter 8, Paul has described what we are in the first seventeen verses. And then in the seventeenth verse he has introduced this idea of the connection between the glory and the suffering, the glory that we will participate in, the suffering in which we now are involved. And having introduced that subject of suffering, beginning in verse 18, really to the end of the chapter, he gives us encouragements as believers for dealing with the trials, the tribulations and the sufferings of life.

In verses 18 through 25 he is giving us the encouragement that there is a certain future hope for every believer in the Lord Jesus. There is a glory to come, which we will all participate in. And he gives that to us as a consolation in the face of our suffering.

In verses 26 and 27, he says secondly, in addition to that future hope, we have right now the Holy Spirit Himself, the third person of the Trinity, who intercedes for us. And when we have come to the end of our rope, and we have no words, we have no capacity to express even our needs to God, the Spirit intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words. And His prayers are understood and heard by the Father, because the one who searches the heart knows the mind of the Spirit. And so with those two encouragements, Paul calls us to go on, to move on, to continue on, even in the midst of trials. He's not finished though. The whole of the rest of the chapter is an encouragement. We come to the third consolation,

the third encouragement in this great passage in Romans 8, beginning in verse 28. So let us hear God's holy word.

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 whom He foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the first-born among many brethren; and whom He predestined, these He also called, and whom He called, these He also justified; and whom He justified, these He also glorified.

Amen, and thus ends this reading of God's holy, inspired and inerrant Word. May He write its eternal truth upon your hearts. Let us pray.

Our Lord and our God, there can be few of us who have gone with You for any time at all, who have not turned to this word, this passage in time of need. And so it is familiar to us, perhaps it is so familiar that we have lost something of its force, of its power. On the other hand, there may be some who have been so much under the weight of burden, that they have had a hard time believing the truth of this word. It just doesn't seem possible or real. Whatever the case, we ask that by the Spirit, you would bring the truth of this word home today, that we would believe it and trust You and rejoice. This we ask in Jesus' Name, Amen.

How do you trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding? How do you do that? How do you do that when you don't understand what you are going through? When it makes no sense? When the experience that you are undergoing is so heavy and so dark that you can't make the end of it from the beginning. You don't know up from down yourself, you can't breathe it's so heavy on you. How do you trust when you're absolutely non-plus by the meaning of your circumstances? It doesn't make sense; you can't see how it's going to work out in the end. You don't even know how it's going to serve the interests of your own sanctification. How do you go on in that circumstance? What do you do when the phone rings, and you pick it up, and there are the words, "It's cancer." Or the phone rings, and you pick it up, and the answer is, "She's gone." What do you do in those moments when everything has been taken out from under your feet? The apostle is speaking to Christians precisely in that kind of a circumstance. For a variety of reasons they are enduring and will endure tremendous suffering. What do you say to a person in those circumstances, and how do you help them trust? Now, my friends, is the time to learn those lessons. Because as the friends who sit around you right now will tell you when you are in the midst of those trials, it is very difficult to learn new truth from the word. You must resort to truth already learned. It may be truth that is experienced at a new level and in a new dimension, a truth that you learned long ago. But then it is very difficult to hear new words of comfort. Now, before those valleys are entered is the time to learn that truth. That's what we are going to do today. For Paul is speaking to those who are under the weight of it. And he's saying to them this is how you trust, this is how you go on. And I want you to see

three things in particular that Paul teaches in this passage.

I. Absolutely everything is ordered by God for your good.

First of all, in the first part of verse 28, Paul gives an amazing declaration about providence. He says that everything, even evil, everything, even evil works for your well-being and God's glory. "And we know that God causes all things to work together for good" he says in the first part of verse 28. In other words, Paul is telling you that absolutely everything in this life is ordered by God for your good.

Now before we tackle that tremendous assertion, we need to understand what Paul is not saying. Paul is not saying that all things are good in the believer's life. There are many things that are not good. Some of those things are things that are done to us, or which we experience which are no fault of our own. Others of those things are things that we do ourselves. They are not good. And Paul is not saying all things are good to believers. No, he is saying that God uses all things, even evil, even pain, even suffering. He uses all things, everything individually, comprehensibly for the good of the believer. So Paul is not asserting that all things are good.

Secondly, Paul is not asking you to take a *Que Sera Sera* approach to life, whatever will be, will be. Now, whatever the origins of that Spanish proverb may be, most of us know that via Doris Day. I know that the under thirty crowd doesn't even know who Doris Day is. You will have to go rent an old movie, but the counsel of the mother to the daughter in *Que Sera Sera* is not what Paul is getting at. Paul is not saying, "Look, honey, don't you worry your pretty head about who you are going to marry one day, and whether you are going to be rich. It's all going to work out in the end." That's not Paul's answer here. Paul is not saying it's all going to work out just fine, don't worry about it. That's not the counsel of peace that he has. He's not asking you to have a hopeful resignation to your fate in the future. That's not his counsel. Nor is Paul saying generically, oh, things always turn out for the best. You know sort of a rosy, blind optimism.

But maybe you have been with a friend, and there's been a child in a life-threatening situation, and you've wanted to say, "Well, everything is going to turn out fine." And then thirty-six hours later, you have had to say, "Oh, I'm so sorry. I can't imagine how you feel." Things don't always just turn out for the best. That's not what Paul is saying. Paul is talking about the special providence of God. And when he says to you that "We know that all things work together for good", he is saying that all things work together for good for the saints because God presses them into His service. God uses every event of our lives for the express good of his people.

Now you know that there are translational difficulties and differences in this

passage. If you are reading from the *King James* this morning, the passage reads, "We know that all things work together for good." If you're reading from the *New American Standard Version* it reads, "We know that God causes all things to work together for good." If you're reading from the *NIV* it says, "We know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him." So there are different translations. What do you do with this? Well, very briefly, let me say the King James probably is the best translation here. But the sense of both the NIV and the New American Standard are perfectly appropriate. They give the sense of what is said.

It is clear that what Paul is talking about in verses 28 through 30 is not just sort of things working out by themselves, but God causing those things to work for the good of His people. This is absolutely clear when you look at verses 29 and 30. When it is clear that it is the purpose of God, which assures that everything conspires for the good, the ultimate good, the final good of His people.

At any rate, you may be asking, "Why would Paul in Romans 8:28 resort to this particular subject? Why would he talk about all things working together for good?" Well, remember this, in verses 26 and 27, Paul has just said to you what? That the Holy Spirit helps you in your weakness and in your infirmity, and intercedes for you when you can't even find the words to pray to the Lord. And someone out there may be tempted to say, "Well, it doesn't feel like the Holy Spirit is interceding for me. And it doesn't feel like the Holy Spirit is helping my infirmities. I feel weaker than ever. My circumstances are so dire I feel abandoned by God."

And the apostle Paul is waiting for that person. He says, I've got a third consolation. It's not only that there's a future hope that's certain for you, it's not only that the spirit intercedes, it is that every event in your life is used by God to work for your ultimate good. Paul is saying in this grand declaration that even our messes are used by God for our ultimate good. He even introduces his statement by saying, "And we know." Now Paul does that a lot in Romans. He usually does that to emphasize two things. When he says, "And we know," first of all he is talking about something that every Christian knows or ought to know, but perhaps hasn't connected with their present circumstance. Every Christian knows that God's special providence is upon him or her. Working out all the events of their lives for his glory and their good. We know that, Paul says. But Paul is asking these believers in Rome to take that in. Drink that in, think about that. He's asking you to drink that in. Think about that. Do you think about the fact that all things are worked together for the good by God to them that love Him. You think about that, he says.

But there's a second reason he says this. He says we know, because this is an undeniable truth, it's an absolutely undeniable truth, but you know, we sometimes chaff at it. We chaff at it because the pain can be so intense, the embarrassment can be so intense, the disappointment can be so intense in the experiences that

we are going through, that we become angry. And the mere suggestion that God is using those very things that embarrass us, disappoint us, or hurt us for our good kind of grates against our natural inclination to rebel against God. And the apostle wants to emphasize this is an undeniable truth, this is not up for discussion. This is a reality, and ultimately it's a reality for our encouragement. Paul is not simply saying that all the nice things work together for our good. He is saying that every obscene evil that you can imagine is turned by God to your best interests: death, illness, marital strife, vocational problems, persecution because of your belief, your child has been diagnosed with an incurable disease. God causes all things to work together for good. A parent has been murdered. God causes all things to work together for good. Your husband is having an affair. God causes all things to work together for good. Your wife wants a divorce. God causes all things to work together for good. Your sister has been kidnapped. Your job has been terminated, and on and on, and on. God causes every single isolated, individual event in your life and experience to work together for your ultimate good. Leon Morris says this, "Believers may be depressed at the harsh conditions of their lives, but they should bear in mind that through it all God is working out a great purpose. No matter what the circumstances, that purpose will not be overthrown, and it culminates in final glory."

Paul is holding out for us this truth of the special providence of God over His children. And my friends, it is one of the most comforting truths of the Bible, because in it we learn that there is no meaningless suffering in our life. There is no wasted suffering in our experience. There is no purposeless experience at all in the totality of our life. Every single isolated event, God in His wisdom uses to bring about His purpose for your glory. That's what Paul is saying in Romans 8:28. And that's what he's saying as an encouragement to every believer if we'll drink it in in any difficult circumstance of life.

II. The only ones who can claim this comfort are believers.

Secondly, if you look at the second half of verse 28, Paul goes to say to whom this encouragement belongs. He said that absolutely everything is ordered by God for your good. Well to whom is that promise made. To whom is that commitment made? For whom is that encouragement intended? He is disclosing in the second half of verse 28, the particular recipients of this encouragement. And notice what he says very clearly. The only ones, the only ones who can claim this comfort are believers. This promise, this encouragement, this providence is not generic. It's not for everyone. It is restricted. We might even say it is discriminatory. Paul is not talking about some sort of general principle of the universe. You know, when our football coaches tell us it takes the hard times to make the good times, no pain, no gain; that's not what Paul is saying. He is not saying, "You know, going through suffering makes you a better person." It's far grander than that. It's far more purposeful. This is not just a mechanistic principle in the universe. This is a specific activity of the sovereign God on behalf of His

children whom He has drawn into a saving relationship. It is only for believers. It's only for those who have trusted and rested in Jesus Christ. We cannot assure unbelievers with these words. For the unbeliever, for the one who has rejected God, for the one who does not trust in the Lord Jesus Christ I cannot say this suffering will result in an indescribable weight of glory. This suffering will surely be followed by the completion of God's purposes in you. I cannot give that comfort. For this promise is only made to believers.

And I want you to see the two components of Paul's description in the second half of verse 28. To those who love God, and to those who are called according to His purpose. These are not two different categories. You know, on the one hand God works all things for the good of those who love Him, and on the other hand, He works all things for good for those who are called. As if these are two different groups. These are two descriptions of the same group of people. Paul is describing believers in two ways. And it's very important for you to see how he's describing. One the one hand they are those who love God. Doesn't that make perfect sense in light of I Corinthians 13? "Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels and have not love, I am but a sounding brass and a tinkling symbol. If I have faith to move mountains, if I give my body to be burned, if I give all my possessions to feed the poor and have not love," what does Paul say in I Corinthians 13, "I am nothing." What is he telling you there? He is saying, I shouldn't even be considered a believer, if I am not possessed for love for God and neighbor. Because love is the indispensable evidence of the grace of the Spirit in the life of the believer. And so he is describing the believer here from the standpoint of the product of the Holy Spirit's work in our lives. He's saying, if you believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, if you have trusted in Him alone for your salvation as He has offered in the gospel, you will be possessed of the love of God. Because we love Him, because He first loved us, because He's done a work of grace, we are those who love Him. But he doesn't just say it that way, because he knows that there are some people who might think if he only said those that love God, it might seem as if God's encouragement here is entirely based on our performance. And so he immediately stops, and he says, "And let me remind you that those who love God are called according to His purpose. And the reason they love Him is because He called them. He reached out to them. He sweetly drew them in as we say, and consequently, we love Him." So it looks at it from our perspective and from God's perspective, from our response and from God's initiative, from our love to God in response to His love, and from the perspective of God's call to us which created our love to Him. And the apostle Paul says "It's those who love God, it's those who have run to God for His grace who may be comforted to know that there is no event in their life which I do not rest for the purposes of their good."

III. God has purposed before the world's foundation to glorify you.

And then the apostle thirdly, begins to describe to you what those purposes are.

He tells you that there is no event in life that God doesn't use. He makes it clear that that promise is for believers, those who trust in Him. He begins to delineate God's glorious purpose, and you will see that in verses 29 and 30 which give us an outline of God's purposes for us from the beginning to the end.

And Paul teaches us here that God has purposed before the world's foundation to glorify You. God has purposed before the foundation of the world to glorify you. And He heaps up a description of this purpose. He says four things about it in verse 29, he adds three more things about it in verse 30 that is stretched from the beginning to the end of God's purposes.

First of all, if you look at verse 29, he emphasizes that God has foreloved us. Look at what he says. "For those whom He foreknew, He also predestined." Now I want you to notice a few things about this. Though there are passages in the Bible and in the New Testament, such as in Peter, where the word *foreknew* means for God *to foresee* or *to have foreknowledge of future events*, that is not what foreknew or foreknow means here. Here it means God setting His love on His children before the foundation of the world. It means for love.

Now, how do I know that? Well, notice that this passage does not say, as some of our non-Calvinistic friends like to say from time to time, that God foresaw that we would choose Him, and, therefore, chose us. Now, of course, that makes no sense whatsoever. But, even if it did, even it did, that can't be what Paul is saying, because he does not say, "for what He foreknew," but he says, "for whom He foreknew."

In other words, this is a personal relationship that he is talking about. He is talking about a personal relationship of love when he uses the term foreknow. He's not talking about God seeing something that we do or some choice that He makes; he's talking about the Lord God of heaven and of earth, setting His love on you before you existed. For whom He foreknew those he predestined. See, this is the foreknowledge of relationship.

Just as Genesis tells us that Adam knew Eve, he doesn't mean that he knew her name and address. He had the deepest of marital relationships with her. And just as the Old Testament speaks of God knowing His people, it doesn't mean He knows what you look like. It means that He is involved in a love relationship with you which sets you apart from every other being in the world. So also Paul is saying, before the foundation of the world God loved you, and because He loved you, secondly, He predestined you. That is, He chose you. He chose you, and He set out a purpose for your life before time, and that purpose is invincible.

And here's Paul word to you. You're in the midst of it, and you can't see. And you don't see how things are going to work out. You think this time I'm done for. This time I don't see how I can make it through. This time I don't see how the pieces are ever going to fit together. And here's Paul, and he comes in, and he says,

God set His love on you before the foundation of the world, and He predestined you, He chose you. He set His purposes on your life, and those purposes are not able to be overthrown. They are invincible. There is nothing, there's no circumstance, there's no opponent in the world that can overthrow those purposes.

IV. God has purposed before the world's foundation to glorify you.

And thirdly, He goes on to tell you what those purposes are. He says that He predestined you to share in the likeness of His Son. Look at verse 29. "He predestined us to become conformed to the image of His son." Now we know how often that language is used in the New Testament to indicate a believer being morally transformed into the likeness of the Lord Jesus Christ. It doesn't mean that we participate in the very being of the trinity. It means that God makes us to be morally like His Son. He sanctifies us. He sets us apart. He makes us holy. We begin to love the things that the Lord Jesus loved, and hate the things the Lord Jesus hates, and live like Him and love like him and care like Him.

And though Paul certainly must have some of that in his mind, the context suggests that he means something far more than this. He's thinking of that exaltation of Christ. He's thinking of the resurrected Christ and the ascended Christ who right now sits at the right hand of God the Father Almighty. He rules the universe. He's coming back on clouds of glory surrounded by hosts of angels. The whole world will bow and worship Him, and the apostle Paul is saying, you think about what the Lord Jesus Christ is, you think of the image of the Lord Jesus Christ, and God is going to grant that you would share in His likeness. You're going to share in His glory. Did you hear that illustration that Isaiah gave of the glory of the people of God being brought back out of captivity by their captors? And the people who had abused them and held them hostage, the soldiers are carrying their children on their backs and on their shoulders. And they are cheering as they come back into the land. And the apostle Paul says, let me tell you something better than that. Let me tell you something better than that. You are going to share in the glory of the ascended, the resurrected, the reigning Lord Jesus Christ.

But he's not done there. He goes on to say, notice that He would be the firstborn among many brethren. So our justification doesn't diminish the exaltation of Christ; it enhances it and manifests it. That is, as we are glorified, and as we share in the glory of our older brother, our elder brother, isn't it glorious to be able to refer to the Lord Jesus Christ that way- we share in the glory of our elder brother. His glory will not be diminished. In fact, it will be manifested because He is the reason we are participating in that glory. You think of Peter, and you think of Peter's participation in Jesus' humiliation when, in the hour of Jesus' need, Peter denies Him three times. And the Lord Jesus turns to Him and looks at him, and what comes to Peter's mind? Those words. "Peter, Peter, Satan has desired

to sift you like wheat, but I have prayed for you."

Now I want to ask you this. On that day in glory, do you think Peter is going to have an inkling that he had anything to do with the reason that he is there sharing the glory of the Lord Jesus Christ. No. He's going to know, and you're going to know, and God our Lord is going to know that the reason that he is there is because of what Jesus has done. And so our participation in that glory itself is going to be a display of the fact that Jesus is the firstborn among many brethren. He is the first fruits of the resurrection. He's the first fruits of the ascension, and we, too, will share with Him. The dust of the earth will sit on the throne of heaven. In our flesh we are oppressed. In our flesh we shall see God. And that will only enhance His glory. And the apostle Paul says, that's God's purpose for you. That's the purpose that He has set out for you. And no event of your life can interfere with that purpose, and in a strange way the suffering of our lives is connected by some inexplicable nexus to that glory which we are going to participate in. And I can't explain that to you, all I can say is look at Jesus life and look at how every event of His life, every event of His humiliation is a part of His exaltation now. I don't understand that, and that's so helpful because there are going to be experiences in your life that you don't understand. You may not understand them now, you may not understand them in five years, you may not understand them in twenty-five years, you may never understand them in this life. You may not even understand them in glory. But, the Father says, even if you don't understand, I do; and I am causing these things to serve the interests of your glory and your good. That's mind boggling.

And then in verse 30, Paul says now everyone that God has predestined, God has done three more things for. He has called them, He's justified them, and He's glorified them. God is the one who has called you. He's irresistibly drawn you savingly to Jesus Christ. When you would have done anything else in the world but bow the knee to the Lord Jesus Christ, He has sweetly drawn you to Him. You remember C.S. Lewis talking about his conversion? He said he came kicking and screaming. He was the most miserable convert in England, he said. He didn't want to be saved. He didn't want to bow the knee. God didn't care. He drew him sweetly to the Lord Jesus Christ. He was called, he was effectively called, he was irresistibly drawn to the Savior.

Everyone that God predestined is drawn to the Savior. And then they are justified. They are declared to be right with God, not on the basis of their work or merit, but on the basis of what the Lord Jesus Christ has done.

And then notice what Paul says in the past tense, "And you have been glorified." You are glorified. He says it as if it has already happened. It's so certain that you're going to share this glory with God that he speaks of it in the past tense.

This is the good, which Paul is speaking about in verse 28. This is the good, which God conspires to bring about in every event of your life. I don't understand

that. I don't have to. All I have to do is believe God's word and trust in Him. May God grant that you would be able to do so. Let's pray.

Our Lord and our God, grant that we may believe the Word, and trust in You with all our heart, leaning not to our own understanding. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

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