

God's Commitment to our Good
Romans 8:28-30

Today we are going to consider a verse that has a bad reputation with some people. Here's the verse:

28 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.

If you care to look you will find blog posts and articles written about how hurtful it can be to quote this verse to those who are in the midst their suffering. To tell a person who's experienced deep loss, "Keep your chin up because God causes all things to work together for good," trivializes what s/he is going through. There are times when we hold off on making pronouncements about suffering and when we "weep with those who weep." And so we definitely need to be careful in how we use this verse.

But as part of Scripture, this verse is God-breathed and therefore profitable. Instead of ignoring or mocking this verse, we need to understand its proper function in our lives and in our theology. By God's grace, that's what we'll do today. We are going to work our way through Romans 8:28-30.

As I read verse 28 again, notice how Paul begins by saying, "And we know. . ." This is the fifth time that Paul includes his readers and writes that "we know" something. By expressing himself this way Paul was acknowledging the general consensus that existed among believers on various subjects/experiences. I say today to all believers here. . . .

28 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.

When Paul says "all things" I believe he has in mind virtually everything that happens to us in this life. I say that because in the last paragraph of Romans 8 he writes that believers experience distress, persecution, famine, sword; he describes himself using Psalm 44, saying "we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered." I believe Paul would have us consider everything that happens to us in this life in light of this statement: our joys and sorrows, our gains and our losses, our victories and our defeats.

Of course Paul is not saying that all things are good; Paul would be the first to affirm that many of the things that happen to us are bad or evil. Neither is he implying that we should passively accept everything that comes into our lives; in Matthew 10:23 Jesus sent out His disciples and told them that "whenever they persecute you in one city, flee to the next. . ." In that situation it was the will of God that they avoid suffering.

Paul isn't saying that we should be able to analyze every single situation and identify ways that God is working all things together for the good. I don't think this promise suggests that we'll always be able to make pronouncements about how God is working all things together in every circumstance.

I think this is **a big-picture statement about God's sovereignty in our lives**. If you are a believer in Jesus Christ, God uses everything that you experience in this life for good; this good may involve you being conformed to the image of Christ or others being conformed to the image of Christ (as we'll discuss in verse 29). Even if we have no clue what God is doing, we be confident that God is at work accomplishing "good."

We see examples of this throughout Scripture - of God sovereignly working in the midst of suffering and tragedy. Consider Joseph's experience in the book of Genesis. Out of jealousy his brothers sold him into slavery. Joseph ended up as a servant in Pharaoh's household. When his master's (Potiphar's) wife tried to seduce Joseph, he refused. Out of spite she had him thrown into prison. Years later because of his God-given ability to interpret dreams, Joseph was released from prison and given a position of authority in the kingdom. Because he had this position of authority he was able to rescue his family from famine. In the larger context, Joseph was able to preserve the descendants of Abraham through whom the Messiah would come.

After their father Jacob died, Joseph's brothers apologized to him, asking for mercy because they thought he would take revenge upon them. In Genesis 50:20 Joseph makes a statement to his brothers using language very similar to Romans 8:28.

20 "As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good in order to bring about this present result, to preserve many people alive."

Joseph didn't deny that his brothers intended evil against him. They were responsible for selling him into slavery. But Joseph understood that God was sovereignly accomplishing good. God used Joseph's slavery and imprisonment and suffering to put him in a position of authority so that he could "preserve many people alive." In Joseph's situation, God caused even the horrible things that happened to him to work together for good. My guess is that while he was in the midst of his hardship he didn't have a clue; but after the fact he did.

I think Paul writes what he does in Romans 8:28 so that we can go through suffering and trials with the assurance that God is at work accomplishing good even when we don't understand it (and even if we never understand it). I don't understand the earthquakes in Nepal, the Christians beheaded in Iraq and Syria, the 2 cops in my hometown who were shot, various ways that my kids have suffered. I may never understand how God is at work behind and around these situations. We don't call evil "good" and we don't pretend that our suffering is insignificant. But we do have confidence that God is accomplishing good.

But notice **who** can have this knowledge and confidence: "those who love God and who are called according to His purpose." Paul isn't describing an elite group of Christians here; this is a basic two-fold description of all believers.

First, Paul mentions "those who love God." Most (if not all) believers would admit, "I don't love God as fully as I should. . . I'm inconsistent and imperfect in my love for

God. . .” And yet all believers can say from the heart, “I **do** love God. My deepest affection is for God Himself.” Luther talked about this last week when he talked about the “great commandment” to love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength. As he pointed out, we do this because we have been given the Holy Spirit (Ephesians 1:13-14). This promise is first of all for those who love God.

Second, Paul says this promise is for “those who are called according to His purpose.” If loving God represents our response to God, being “called according to His purpose” represents God’s work in our lives. Jesus used this term “called” in a broader sense than Paul did. In Matthew 22:14 Jesus said that “many are called but few are chosen.” The sense there is that the call to enter the kingdom goes out broadly to many people but relatively few hear and respond (and are thus among “the chosen”).

But Paul always uses the term “called” in a narrower sense, referring only to believers. In numerous places he writes that God “calls” or “summons” people into a relationship with Himself. This is analogous to Jesus calling or summoning people by saying, “Follow Me.” Christians are people who have been called by God in this way.

Notice that we are “called according to His purpose.” We are called into a relationship with Him with a particular purpose (or plan) in mind, with **God’s purpose** in mind. We aren’t given new life so that we can do whatever we want. . . We are called into a relationship so that we can be caught up into God’s purpose and plan. Specifically we are called to become like Christ and represent Him in this world (making disciples of all nations).

Notice how Paul supports this statement that God is causing all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose”: he talks about foreknowledge and predestination!

29 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; 30 and these whom He predestined, He also called; and these whom He called, He also justified; and these whom He justified, He also glorified.

Terms like foreknowledge and predestination (verse 29) are often associated with debates and controversy. These terms are legitimately complicated - largely because they describe what has taken place in the mind of God in the unseen realm. But I believe that these terms are often unnecessarily controversial and contentious; they become so when they are forced to answer abstract questions that they weren’t originally intended to answer.

The first time I seriously encountered the term predestination was when I was a junior in college. Our dorm-room Bible study took four weeks to discuss predestination in Ephesians 1. We debated back and forth about the relationship between predestination and human will, whether or not it was unfair that some are apparently predestined and others aren’t, etc. In other words, we tried to answer all sorts of questions that the Bible

doesn't directly address. Of course after four weeks of this we ended up more confused than when we began.

I've since come to the conviction that our priority should be to understand these words/doctrines in their specific contexts and allow these doctrines to fulfill the same function in our lives that they were intended to fulfill in the lives of the original recipients (the Romans and the Ephesians). Here in Romans 8, verse 29 begins with the word "for" in all the major translations. Paul brings up foreknowledge and predestination to support what he's just written in verse 28. Specifically I think he's expanding on the idea that believers have been "called according to [God's] purpose."

Paul introduces the foreknowledge and predestination of God in order to give the believers at Rome the confidence that God wanted them as His own and therefore He would sustain their relationship with Him and would accomplish His purpose (the good) in and through them. Let's notice some of the details.

29 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;

The verb "to foreknow" can have a couple of different connotations in different contexts. Sometimes it simply means that you know something beforehand. For example in Acts 26:5 Paul tells King Agrippa that the Jews had foreknowledge of his life as a Pharisee; they had known about it beforehand. If that is the meaning here in Romans 8:29 Paul is saying something along the lines that God knew ahead of time who would believe and those are the ones He predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son.

The more likely meaning, I think, is that Paul is using the term "know" much the way it was used in Old Testament Hebrew. To know someone meant to have a relationship with that person/people. In Amos 3:2, for example, God says to Israel:

2 "You only have I chosen [lit. known] among all the families of the earth; Therefore I will punish you for all your iniquities."

God certainly had knowledge **about** all the families of the earth, but He had entered into a covenantal relationship with Israel alone. To **foreknow** someone meant to "enter into a relationship with someone ahead of time." As I've thought about this for the past 30 years, I've come to the conclusion that the reason we are told that God "foreknew" us as believers is to let us know that we are wanted: God wanted a relationship with us long before we wanted a relationship with Him. Instead of trying to figure out how foreknowledge can be compatible with our response of faith, we should take great comfort and find great security in the truth of God's foreknowledge.

Paul continues, "For those whom He foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son." To pre-destine is to destine or determine something ahead of time. Paul says that God pre-determined that those whom he foreknew (believers) would become conformed to the image of His Son. This is the "good" that God is committed to bringing about. When we don't know how to pray as we

should and when we experience suffering, we can take comfort in the thought that God has predestined us to become Christlike. The same God who wanted a relationship with us is committed to conforming us to the image of His Son. This begins at conversion, continues through this life, and is completed at the return of Christ.

Paul adds, “so that He would be the firstborn among many brothers.” The result of our conformity to Christ is that we can legitimately call Jesus our “Big Brother.” Because He is the firstborn, we can be assured that what happened to Him will happen to us. Again, this begins in this life and is fulfilled at the return of Christ. If you’re a believer and you feel “stuck” in your spiritual growth, take courage from the fact that God wants you and is committed to conforming you to the image of Jesus, your older brother.

In verse 30 Paul continues to describe God’s commitment to completing our salvation:

30 and these whom He predestined, He also called; and these whom He called, He also justified; and these whom He justified, He also glorified.

Again, Paul seems to be using the term “called” in a more restrictive sense when he writes that “**these** whom He predestined, He also called.” As believers we readily confess that God was faithful to call us into a relationship with Himself. “And these whom He called, He also justified.” In Romans 3, 4, and 5 Paul established that a person is justified by faith. Nothing Paul has said about foreknowledge and predestination and calling nullify the need for a personal response of faith. Repeatedly Paul declares that we are justified by faith alone.

Paul concludes verse 30 by writing that “these whom He justified, He also glorified.” Paul uses the same tense (the aorist) as he’s used for the other four verbs; in English we generally translate using the past tense. But since Paul consistently speaks of our glorification as something that lies in the future, we should probably conclude that Paul uses this tense to stress that it’s a certainty for those who are in Christ Jesus. As we’ve seen throughout Romans 8, God is faithful to bring our salvation to fulfillment. Present suffering isn’t worthy to be compared to the glory that will be revealed at the return of Christ. At the return of Christ we will **see** the glory of God and we will **share** the glory of God.

This “golden chain” (as it’s sometimes called) gives us great confidence that God is sovereignly working in our lives. The God who foreknew, predestined, called, justified, and glorified us works all things together for our good.

As I think back over the events of my life I can see various ways God was sovereignly at work.

- I can see how God sovereignly led me to people that showed me what a relationship with God is all about; when I was cluelessly living my life God got my attention and wooed me to Himself.
- I think about the events that took place 27 years ago when Brenda and I moved to Manhattan; no doubt about the sovereignty of God there. . . God has used our relationships with you in eternal ways - to help us become more like Christ.

- My father's death in 1990 (at age 59)- I see how God used the death of my earthly father (and the void it created) to show me things about my relationship with Him, my Heavenly Father.
- In retrospect I see how God sovereignly used various conflicts and trials to teach me things I wouldn't have learned any other way.

I see God's sovereignty in various ways. You probably can also.

But I have no idea what God has done through other situations in my life. And I have no idea how God is sovereignly at work in light of some of the things some of you are facing. When I look around this room on Sunday mornings, I see people who have faced incredible pain and loss that I can't understand.

But even though we have no idea what God might be doing in some circumstances, ***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.*** We know this because He is the God who foreknew us, who predestined us to become conformed to the image of His Son, who called, justified and glorified us. We know this because He didn't spare His one and only Son. We know this because Jesus - God in the flesh - wept when His friend Lazarus died. We see in Jesus God with tears running down His face. That God wouldn't abandon us in our suffering. That God is not impotent to complete what He's begun. That God can be trusted no matter what happens in this life.