

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
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IF GOD IS FOR US

Romans 8:28-39

It is hard to imagine saying anything about these verses in Romans 8 that hasn't been said before. But that is okay, because faithfulness to God and His Word is my goal, not originality. This passage of Scripture is understandably a favorite of many Christians, as Paul reminds us of the certainty of God's saving purpose and the triumph of His unchanging love. One writer says that in these verses, Paul "soars to sublime heights unequalled elsewhere in the New Testament." His mind "sweeps over the whole plan and purpose of God from (eternity) past to an eternity still to come, from the divine foreknowledge and predestination to the divine love from which absolutely nothing will be able to separate us." Paul's message is that "our Christian hope is solidly grounded on the unwavering love of God. So the burden of Paul's climax" in Romans 8 "is the eternal security of God's people, on account of the eternal unchangeableness of God's purpose, which is itself due to the eternal steadfastness of God's love" (John Stott, *The Message of Romans*, 246).

These verses have been a source of immense comfort, encouragement, and hope for Christians in all sorts of circumstances for the last two thousand years. Another writer, though, has called Romans 8:28 "the best loved, least understood verse in the Bible" (Ron Lee Davis, *Gold in the Making*, 63). Whether that is hyperbole or not, the possibility of misunderstanding Romans 8:28 is an ever-present danger. So, let's begin by taking a closer look at it.

The NIV translation reads: "And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love Him, who have been called according to His purpose." The ESV translation goes like this: "And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to His purpose." There is some question about the grammatical construction of verse 28 in the Greek, leaving open the possibility that either "God" or "all things" is the subject. Whichever is the case, there is no question that Paul is not suggesting that all things just work out by themselves for the good of believers in Christ.

It does not mean that God will allow only good things to happen to us, if we are truly seeking to live as faithful followers of Christ. Nor does it mean that "everything will come out in the wash" and that God will spare us from suffering the consequences of our actions regardless of the mess we have made of our lives. What it means, of course, is that in His sovereign power and grace and love, God can and does bring good out of the worst, most evil and painful circumstances we will ever encounter. Not everything that happens to us or to others we care about is good. But God is able to use all things, including what is evil, for His good purposes in our lives.

In this sense, Romans 8:38 is like a pillow on which we can rest our weary heads (Stott, 246) in the midst of the most disruptive moments or distressing events we face in life. It is an

affirmation of faith that God can and will bring good out of the most evil or tragic events that crash into our lives, if our hearts are open to Him.

Can you make this affirmation of faith today?

Notice that verse 28 begins with the words: “And we know” This is not just something we hope or wish to be true. It is not something we want to be true if it can be true. It is something we know. How do we know it? We know it to be true by faith. We know it to be true because God has revealed it to us in His Word, in the person and work of His Son, our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, and, though our vision and understanding are so finite, in our own experience of life in this world.

There are lots of things in this world we don’t know. We don’t know who will be elected President of the United States in November. None of us knows the day of our death or when Jesus will return. We don’t know when (or if) our nation will turn away from its sins and turn to God in true repentance and faith. We don’t know what the future holds for our children or our children’s children. But some things we do know. Of these truths in Romans 8:28 we can be sure. We know, first, that *God is at work in this world and, in particular, in the lives of His people*. God is at work in your life and mine. He is ceaselessly, energetically, and purposefully at work on our behalf. He is never distracted or preoccupied.

Second, we know that God is at work *for the good of His people*, for your good and mine. You have to understand, though, that God’s good in your life is not defined by things like good health, a great job, success in your field of expertise, a good reputation, a nice home, financial security, or a comfortable life. God is far more concerned with your holiness than He is with your happiness.

Yes, God is at work for the good of His people. But it is God’s definition of good, not ours, that matters most. The good that God is working out in our lives is described in verses 29 and 30, as we will see in a moment.

Third, we know that God is at work for our good *in all things*, which includes the sufferings, the groanings, the troubles and tragedies of this life. Which is to affirm our conviction that nothing that happens in this life, from the worst wildfire or flood to the most horrific act of violence or terrorism, from the most painful act of betrayal to the worst news imaginable, from the most traumatic experience to the most devastating setback – nothing that happens lies beyond “the overruling, overriding scope of God’s providence” and unfailing love (Stott, 247).

“In all things.” It is not always possible from our vantage point to see how God can or will bring good out of what is pure evil. We don’t know how in the world He can possibly do it. But we believe it nonetheless. We walk by faith, not by sight (2 Corinthians 5:7). We take God at His word. We believe God because of who He is and what He has already done. We believe, most of all, because of what God has done for us in the incarnation, life, suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus – through whose death God brought salvation, forgiveness, life, hope, and joy to us out of the most unspeakable evil, injustice, and suffering.

We know, fourth, that the promise of Romans 8:28 – that in all things God is at work for good in the lives of His people – is for *those who love God and have been called according to His purpose*. Our love for God, of course, is preceded by and rooted in His love for us. 1 John 4:19 says: “We love because He (God) first loved us.” We love *God* because He first loved us. God does not love us because we love Him. His love for us is not contingent on our love for Him. He loved us first. His love for us is not fickle. His love for us is unchangeable, which means there is nothing you can ever do to cause God to stop loving you.

We love God because He loved us first and demonstrated His love for us in giving His Son as our Savior, as the one and only atoning sacrifice for our sins. Our love for God is not a merit badge that earns the love of God for us. No. Our love for God is simply the response of our hearts to the wonder of His deep, deep love for us.

The overarching purpose for which God has called us is spelled out in verses 29 and 30 where Paul lays out before us five steps in the order of salvation (Latin, *ordo salutis*). The apostle says: “For those God *foreknew* He also *predestined* to be conformed to the likeness of His Son, that He (Jesus His Son) might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those He *predestined*, He also *called*; those He *called* He also *justified*; those He *justified*, He also *glorified*.”

Do you see the five steps of stages in God’s eternal plan? It embraces the past, present, and future. It begins with God’s foreknowledge and predestination (or foreordaining) in eternity past, before the foundation of the world, as it says in Ephesians 1:4. God’s effectual calling in our lives and our justification take place in our life experience in the present. Our glorification, which Paul speaks of as an accomplished fact, is still in the future.

God’s purpose in all this, as Paul says in verse 29, is to make us “conformed to the likeness (or image) of His Son.” God is in the process of making us like Jesus. He wants our lives to reflect the life and light and love of Jesus. Jesus Himself said that we are to let our light shine before others, so that they may see our good deeds and give praise to our Father in heaven (Matthew 5:14-16).

Unlike some (or many) of you, I don’t have much aptitude for science. But I read something about a scientific term called albedo. Albedo is a measurement of how much sunlight a celestial body reflects. Of the planets in our solar system, Venus has the highest albedo at .75, which means that it reflects 75 percent of the sunlight that hits it. Depending on where it is in its orbit, the wannabe planet Pluto has an albedo ranging from .49-.66. The earth’s albedo is .30. The albedo of Mars is .29. Our night-light, the moon, has an albedo of about .12. It reflects only 12 percent of its sunlight, and yet it lights up the sky on cloudless nights.

Here is the thing: Each of us has a spiritual albedo. The more we reflect the light and likeness of Jesus, the higher our albedo. The goal – God’s goal for our lives – is that we have an albedo of 100 percent, being fully conformed to the likeness and character of Jesus our Lord. (Adapted from Mark Batterson, *If: Trading Your If Only Regrets for God’s What If Possibilities*, 220.)

That is the purpose and goal for which Jesus came and died for our sins. That is the purpose and goal for which God is working all things together in our lives. Even the hard things. Even the painful things. Even the things that overwhelm our hearts with sorrow. Even the things we desperately wish were not necessary in order to accomplish God's purposes. He is in the process of reforming, reshaping, refining, and transforming us into the likeness and character of Jesus. He wants us to reflect the Lord's glory as we are being transformed into His likeness with ever-increasing glory (2 Corinthians 3:18). He wants us to shine like stars in a dark and depraved universe, holding out the word of life (the message of the gospel) to a world of people who still live in darkness (Philippians 2:15-16).

Look at the five steps listed here in the order of salvation. Paul speaks first of "those God foreknew." The doctrine of God's foreknowledge has divided Christians from the beginning. Does it simply mean that God knew in advance who would respond in faith to the gospel message and become members of the body of Christ? Or does it mean something more? Does His foreknowledge mean that He knew them (us) ahead of time in a relationship of sovereign love? Theologians have argued about it for centuries. One writer wisely notes that Paul speaks of "those whom God foreknew", not "that which God foreknew" (Ray Stedman, *From Guilt to Glory, Vol. 1*, 299). What God foreknew goes way beyond information. He foreknew individuals like you and me. His foreknowledge includes His free and sovereign choice to shower His love on His people.

God's foreknowledge and His act of foreordaining or predestination go together. You really can't separate them. (I suppose you can separate them, but it would be wrong to do so.) They belong together. They both point to God's electing grace and unconditional love for us. Paul expresses it beautifully in Ephesians 1:4-6, where he says: "For He (God) chose us in Him (Christ) before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in His sight. In love He predestined us to be adopted as His sons (children) through Jesus Christ, in accordance with His pleasure and will – to the praise of His glorious grace, which He has freely given us in the One (the Son) He loves."

It is all by grace. God did it all. One theologian highlights the significance of this understanding when he says that if God predestines people because He sees beforehand and therefore knows that they are going to believe the gospel, then the ground of their salvation is in themselves and their merit in believing, instead of being in Him and His mercy and grace (Stott, 249).

Do you see how important it is to understand what God's foreknowledge really means? What God said to Jeremiah the prophet is just as true of you and me:

The word of the LORD came to me, saying:
 "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you
 (or I chose you).
 Before you were born I set you apart."
 (Jeremiah 1:4-5)

God knew you before He formed you in your mother's womb. He did not just know about you or about the choices you would make in life. He knew you. And He wrapped His arms of love around you with a love that will never let you go. In His sovereign, saving love, He knew you and chose you to be His son or daughter.

Those whom God foreknew and foreordained to be His beloved sons and daughters through faith in Christ – these He also called, He invited, He summoned, He drew to Himself in faith through the ministry of the gospel and the work of the Holy Spirit in different ways and at different times in our lives. You may or may not be able to pinpoint the time when you heard and responded to God's call in your life. I responded to the call of God to believe the gospel on August 23, 1967, at Rockland Methodist Church in Rockland, PA – 49 years ago this Tuesday. Knowing the time and place isn't the important thing. Knowing it happened is what counts.

Those whom God called He justified, which, I trust you know, means God pronounced them (us) “not guilty” and declared them (us) righteous in His sight, imputing the righteousness of Jesus Christ our Savior to us. Remember what Paul said back in Romans 5:1: “Since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.” Justification brings peace with God. Like a river glorious.

Those whom God justified, Paul says, He also glorified. He says it like it has already happened. But we know it still awaits us in the future. One writer calls this the “prophetic past tense” (James Denney, in Stott, 253). It is the anticipation of an outcome that is certain.

Between our justification and our glorification is our sanctification, which is the process by which we are being formed, transformed, and conformed into the likeness or character of the Lord Jesus here and now. Glory is what we will be like when we are perfectly conformed to the image of Christ there and then. “Sanctification,” as F. F. Bruce put it, “is glory begun; glory is sanctification consummated” (Bruce, *Romans (Revised)*, 168).

There is much, much more in this passage for us to explore. So we will, God willing, come back to it next Sunday. Before I close, though, I want you to ponder the question Paul asks in verse 31. There are actually two related questions there. We'll come back to the second question (If God is for us, who can be against us?) next week. For now, just the first question:

What, then, shall we say in response to this?

This is Christian theology that requires a response. What Paul has laid out for us in verses 28-30 is theology that has practical implications for both this life and eternity. These are truths that can transform your life, if you embrace them with your whole heart and let them saturate your mind.

The only response that makes any sense is to say: “Lord, I believe. Thank You for Your amazing grace. Thank You for Your deep, deep love for me. What a great God You are! Because of all that You have done, I give you my heart and my life.” It is the only response that makes sense.

If you have never responded to the gospel message of God's saving love and purpose for your life in this way, if you have never put your trust in the Lord Jesus and His saving work for you, or if you need to renew your trust in God to work out His good purposes in all the circumstances of your life – good or bad, now is the time to do it. As we pray and sing our Hymn of Response, get down to business with God. Ask Him to do what needs to be done in your heart to make you right with Him. Let Him have your life, because He can do more with it than you can.

Lord, let it be so, to the glory of Your name. Amen.