

The Reason for Hope

Romans 8:28-30

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People who read the Bible (and I mean all of us) tend to gravitate toward, and build our lives on, texts that make us feel good or challenge us to be better people. At the same time, we tend to ignore passages that make us think too much, are difficult, or which do not fit into our preference or prejudice. This is why in the history or the church we see the shameful support of things like human slavery, segregation, the marginalization of women, and events like the crusades.

This morning, we will look at examples of both kinds of verses: one is a favorite verse for many which is followed by two of the most controversial, dismissed, or explained away verses in all the Bible. I believe the person who takes the time to hear what the verses are saying (even if you don't understand them fully) will, like Paul, end the chapter with an explosion of praise.

Our goal is always to subject what we have been taught to what the Word of God actually says. We are all guilty of reading into the Bible what we want it to say, or what fits with our prejudices. The question should be: What is God teaching us? When we look at difficult and debated texts we must try hard to stick to what the Bible says but we do so with a measure of humility that comes from knowing the limitations of our minds and reason. We are well aware that our ways are not God's ways; so we proceed humbly.

²⁸ And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.

The Good News About our Sovereign God

This is a promise that many have held onto in the toughest times of life. In the verses leading to this verse the discussion was about the suffering or the groaning of the faithful. These verses all go together. They are important words because no one likes to suffer. Yet, we all know that suffering is a part of living. The Christian is not immune to these things. As Rick pointed out last week, the wise prayer of the Holy Spirit helps us in our time of weakness. When we don't know what to say, the Holy Spirit knows exactly how to pray for us.

But there is a truth here in verse 28 that should help us better endure the hard times. In all things (even the tough things) the Lord is working for the good of all those who are called according to His purpose.

Let me first point out what this passage is NOT saying. Paul is not saying that all circumstances ARE good. It is not the circumstance that is good . . . it is what God does with those circumstances in the lives of his faithful that is good. Some circumstances are just plain evil. Others are tragic. Suffering is often debilitating and confusing.

When someone is going through a time of suffering, it is not helpful, and perhaps even insensitive to quote this verse. We can't hear these words in the times of deepest pain. We need comfort, not verses about how God can bring good from bad stuff. The reason we can't hear these verses is because at this stage we are often mad at God for the circumstances and do not believe what the Bible is selling! Most of us have been here. What we really need is a friend who will enter into our suffering and maybe give us a good hug.

Second, the text does not say that God causes the bad things that happen. In other words, the Lord does not usually send the hard times. I say "usually," because there are times in the Bible where God has sent things to punish the nation or to punish one of the leaders. Most of the time suffering is a natural result of living in a sin fallen world.

What makes this verse compelling is the reminder that God is in control. This means even when He allows His children to face hard times, He is doing so to deepen us, to teach those around us, to open a door for us to minister in new ways, or to help us realize His greatness and sufficiency in a whole new way.

It is no fun to fall like I did and get staples in your head and the other things that resulted. (Flying in the helicopter was fun but would have been more fun if I could have see the ground.) However, I am convinced that the Lord is guiding me, teaching me, deepening my faith, clarifying my priorities and maybe even using me in all the events of the last two weeks. Our comfort comes from know that suffering is never wasted in the life of a child of God.

The third thing we need to remember about this text is that it is a promise for believers. The promise is for those who "love God" and "are called according to His purpose." That doesn't mean that God may not use suffering to awaken a non-believer.

The phrase "called" is an interesting one. We will see the word come up again in the next verses. I believe the word for "call," is used in two ways in the Bible. First, there is a "general call," it is like when someone puts a general invitation to an event on Facebook. When it comes to the Lord, the invitation is for anyone who believes to be saved. However, Romans 3 has already told us that no one seeks God. That means that no one will choose to come to Christ by their own volition or choice.

The second kind of call is, in theological circles, called "The effectual call." This is because this call is effective. This call is like if a police officer tells you need to come down to the station. It is an invitation that you are going to take! One way or the other you will be there.

When it comes to salvation, the effective call refers to the call of the Holy Spirit that will effectively "turn on the light" of our soul and change our desire so we are now receptive to the offer of salvation rather than resistant to it.

Over in the gospel of John we see an example of this call. Jesus said to the people,

³⁷ However, those the Father has given me will come to me, and I will never reject them. ³⁸ For I have come down from heaven to do the will of God who sent me, not to do my own will. ³⁹ And this is the will of God, that I should not lose even one of all those he has given me, but that I should raise them up at the last day. ⁴⁰ For it is my Father's will that all who see his Son and believe in him should have eternal life. I will raise them up at the last day. ⁴⁴ For no one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws them to me, and at the last day I will raise them up."

In this passage Jesus says the same thing as Paul. He says no one can (has the ability) to come to Him unless the Spirit draws (invites in that effective way) them. They will see Jesus but won't respond without the work of the Holy Spirit in them. That is the effective call! The point then is that God's children (sometimes called "the elect") can know that God is working in and through every circumstance of their lives. We look for that work and we trust when we can't see it.

The Basis of Our Assurance

The New Living Translation renders 29 and 30

For God knew his people in advance, and he chose them to become like his Son, so that his Son would be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters. ³⁰ And having chosen them, he called them to come to him. And having called them, he gave them right standing with himself. And having given them right standing, he gave them his glory.

Almost every other version of the Bible (ESV, KJV, NIV, NASB, and HCS) use the original theological words that are the most accurate Greek translations. To avoid the unfamiliar words and maybe some of the harshness the old words seemed to carry the NLT chose different words.

²⁹ For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. ³⁰ And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified. (ESV)

I believe these words, challenging as they are, if understood, are some of the most comforting words contained in the Bible and are the reason for the explosion of praise everyone cherishes at the end of the chapter.

These words that are not part of our normal conversation: foreknew, predestined, called, justified and glorified. What seems certain however is the fact that these words form a chain. By that I mean each phrase builds on the other. Everyone foreknown will be all of the other things (predestined, called, justified and glorified).

The first word, "foreknew" (knew His people in advance) is maybe the most difficult word as far as interpreting the passage. Some say this means God knows who is going to respond positively to the gospel. Since He knows who will respond to His offer of salvation, He decided to make them heirs of Christ!

This use of the word “foreknow” in this way makes salvation at least partially a result of man’s free choice. We are saved because of our decision to choose to trust Christ. Salvation then is mostly God’s work on our behalf, but it hangs on our decision of whether or not to receive it. That seems like a work of which we can boast!

At its root there is a belief that there is some good in us that can rally to make the right decision when we need to do so. Therefore, the difference between me and one who does not believe is my choice rather than God’s grace (which is still a significant part of the process). This seems to some degree to make salvation as much about works as it is grace!

The wrinkle comes in chapter 3 where Paul wrote “There is No One seeks God.” If Paul was telling the truth in that passage (which I believe wholeheartedly he was), then God would foresee no one who would choose Him and therefore no one would be saved. In Ephesians 2:1-3 we Paul again affirms,

Once you were dead because of your disobedience and your many sins. ²You used to live in sin, just like the rest of the world, obeying the devil—the commander of the powers in the unseen world. He is the spirit at work in the hearts of those who refuse to obey God. ³All of us used to live that way, following the passionate desires and inclinations of our sinful nature. By our very nature we were subject to God’s anger, just like everyone else.

Paul says we were dead! We weren’t just sick or even handicapped . . . we were dead. Dead people do not make choices. One author wrote,

Spiritual zombies don’t choose the gift of God’s grace for the same reason that prison escapees don’t show up voluntarily at police stations. It isn’t because convicted felons are incapable of locating their local law-enforcement agency. It’s because the police represent everything the convict wants to avoid.¹

If you continue on in Ephesians 2:8-9 you read these words,

God saved you by his grace when you believed. And you can’t take credit for this; it is a gift from God. ⁹Salvation is not a reward for the good things we have done, so none of us can boast about it.

I believe the word foreknown means “loved beforehand.” That is not hard to understand. As soon as a mother or father knows they are going to have a baby they determine they are going to loves that child. If we could love someone who hadn’t done anything yet, why can’t God?

We have no problem with God loving people in this way. Our problem is with the idea that God does not do this for everyone. We will come back to this when Paul addresses the objections to this doctrine in Romans 9.

¹ PROOF. MONGOMERY, JONES (P. 50

For now, just try to wrap your head around the idea that God in His sovereignty (His rule over all creation) manifested that sovereignty by choosing those He knew would someday be on the earth. In other words, He chose who would be saved by His work alone. Those He chose he predestined (which means he assigned our destiny as children of God before we had done anything good or bad to bring about God's decision).

There are people who say, "I don't believe in predestination." Be very careful here! The Bible explicitly teaches this doctrine! To say you don't believe it is to say you don't believe the Bible! It is better to say, "I don't understand predestination."

Do we have questions about predestination? Of course we do! It is a mind-boggling doctrine. We will look at many of those questions when we look at Romans 9 in a couple of weeks. However, here are a couple of the problems people have.

First, there is the question: What about freewill? The key here is how to define "freewill." If freewill is the ability to choose that which we want, then predestination does not violate freewill because what God does by His special call is change our desires so what we want is to freely choose and surrender to Him.

It was Jonathan Edwards who wrote a massive work on "The Freedom of the Will" (his title was much longer!) In this book Edwards observes that we do not choose to do *anything* except that which seems most desirable to me. You came into church this morning and chose your seat based on what was most desirable to you. It may have been the location of the seat, the people sitting around that seat, where it is in terms of the air conditioning, or where you felt you could best hide from the gaze of the Pastor.

Again, we come back to Romans 3 and Ephesians 2 (and other places) and we remember that there is "no one who seeks God." In other words, something must happen in us before we will freely choose to follow Christ. If that does not happen in us, we will freely choose not to respond. This is where that effectual call comes in. God chooses to change our desires so we are open to the message of the gospel.

Second, we ask, "On what basis does God make His choice?" The only thing the Bible tells us is that the choice has nothing to do with anything we did or will do and. Ephesians 1 tells us that God chooses us for the praise of His glorious grace.

In love ⁵ he predestined us for adoption to himself as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, ⁶ to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed us in the Beloved. ⁷ In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace, ⁸ which he lavished upon us, in all wisdom and insight ⁹ making known to us the mystery of his will, according to his purpose, which he set forth in Christ ¹⁰ as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth.

¹¹In him we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to the purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel of his will, ¹²so that we who were the first to hope in Christ might be to the praise of his glory. (Ephesians 1:3-12)

Third, you might ask, “How can I know if I am Chosen by God?” If you turn to Him in faith and trust in Christ, it is because of the Spirit at work in you. No one genuinely trusts in Christ without God’s effectual call. There are people who are swept up in an emotional decision, there are others who call themselves believers because they want to fit in. These superficial conversions will often fade, and these people will appear to “lose their salvation” but I would contend they were not really be saved. True believers will hang on to the end because of God’s promise . . . not because they are exceptionally strong.

Paul says those who are known, and predestined, are then called (with that captivating call). These are the people He justifies (or saves). To justify someone is to declare them innocent. And those He justifies (and this is the best part) . . . He will also glorify. In other words, God began the process and Paul says, He will also finish it. This is why Jesus can say, “No one can snatch them from my hand” (John 10:29) and “I will lose none of those who He has given.” (John 6:39) and it is the reason Paul can say, “Nothing will separate us from the love of God.”

Our assurance of salvation is not anchored to our performance but to His promise to us! It starts with grace, and it will be completed by grace. I know I am going to Heaven not because I am better than anyone! I know I am going to Heaven because God says He will make sure it happens. He will finish the work He started.

I think the biggest question after all this is: “Why Me?” That is the question that haunts me. Why in the world would God choose to save me? Unlike the world where everyone is looking to recruit highly rated draft picks to help His team win . . . God often selects the weak, the broken, and the discarded, and then changes their lives by His grace.

A child of God does not go around bragging that they are among the chosen. Those who do, have no understanding of the real nature of grace. There is nothing of which to boast . . . we did NOTHING to earn salvation! Instead, we should be provoked to worship. How do you repay a God who has done such a wonderful work? We know God doesn’t arbitrarily pick anyone! But we don’t know why He chose us.

All we can do in response is to be humbly grateful. Therefore, we spread the message of salvation wherever we can. We know that no one can be saved unless God does something in them first. We don’t know who God plans to transform. What we do know is He has given us the wonderful privilege of being part of this transforming work. It is a privilege we must never take for granted.