

IS THE GOOD REALLY COMING?

Romans 8:28–30

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Romans 8:28–30 (NIV)

“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. For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he 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.”

The theme of today’s message asks the question “Is the good really coming?” As we have looked together from this section of Scripture which began in verse 18 of Romans 8 and extends to the end of Romans 8, we have found Paul addressing the believer, when the believer is in a squeeze of suffering, or tribulation—of trouble. He is providing in these verses four ways in which the believer can get a handle on this suffering, and relate to it, and come triumphantly through it. One thing he has told us to do is to compare the *now* with the *then*. The *now* is the momentary affliction, but it’s not to be compared with the *then*—the glory—which is coming.

The second thing he has told us—and we looked at this last week in verses 26 and 27—is that when we are in difficulty, the Spirit within us prays for us with groanings inarticulate. We noted paradoxes. We said Paul, on the one hand, indicates “we know not,” and then he turns around in verse 28 and says, “we know.” There’s some things we know not, and that has to do with the immediate. Why? At this moment, we’re passing through this particular aspect of our lives. But in an ultimate sense, we know God is working out everything for the good.

There’s another paradox. We know not how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit prays within us with groanings and sighs which we can’t even understand. The Spirit prays according to the will of God, for God translates the sighs of the Spirit. And they are understandable to Him. So the Spirit within us prays according to the will of God.

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Before we look at the third key in today's passage, that indeed God is working everything for our good (that's the third key of getting through a time of suffering) we need to recognize the stress in this particular passage in regard to how, as believers, we approach suffering and trouble. The stress is on the "we know" or "we reckon," as the King James puts it, or "we consider." As you go through this particular passage in Romans, from 8:18 and on, you can underline the many times "to know" or "to consider" or "to reckon" is used. It's used quite a few times. And simply that we might have a doctrinal ground upon which to stand when the circumstances are shaking us and when our feelings, as well, are running counter to what the Word of God teaches. Our feelings are saying, "God has abandoned us. God could not have allowed this sort of thing to happen to us. God must have something against us." Our feelings are saying that. The circumstances are pressing against us. But in the midst of that, there are some things we know. This is why we have doctrine, because doctrine builds that solid basis which becomes, then, truer than our feelings, truer than the circumstances. If Satan can deny us the doctrine—or if circumstances or feelings can deny us the reality of these doctrines that we hold onto in suffering—then indeed we are cut loose and are adrift in our storms on the sea of life. But we come today to this Scripture. God is working good in all things. There are three things I'd like for us to look at in respect to that text.

I. The first is this: the comprehensiveness, or the totality, of the working.

The comprehensiveness is the word in the RSV "everything," or the word in the King James "all." "We know in everything God works for good..." (verse 28). This means that there is nothing outside, nothing in our life that is outside the promise of the Scripture. Nothing that has happened to us. Nothing that is now happening to us. Nothing that shall happen to us which is outside of this promise: all things.

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You can kind of ransack the file of your own mind, in your own memory, and look for things that are in there, a drawer of your human experience. You can maybe pick out some files that you think, “I don’t possibly see how God can work anything good out of that. Yet the Scriptures are saying comprehensively, totally: “All things, everything.”

If I could just, for a moment, share from our own family experience. I think there are times when we understand later the good God is working. And maybe there are occasions when we will not see the Lord face-to-face that we embrace the breadth of that promise, “God is working good in all things.” Some of you are aware that when Jewel was just a little two-year-old baby, her mother died from complications of giving birth to twins. So her father was left alone to raise three little girls, one girl two-years-old and two girls two weeks old. That’s how Jewel was brought up. Her father never remarried. You look at that situation. Try to go back to when that happened and stand as a Christian in the immediacy of that event and say, “All things work together for good.” It’s like bouncing against the wall. How could God work anything good out of that? A mother dying, leaving three little children to be raised by their father. Yet as you get a chance to see over the breadth of the decades what God may be doing in a life—look at the three girls today. They’re all grown and married. All are vibrantly serving the Lord. You look at characteristics in their life, which God is using, which you know would not have been there had this tragedy not happened in their family. And you do not say the death of Jewel’s mother was good. You don’t say that, because the Scripture doesn’t say that. But what you do say is, “God is able to work good from it.” And you can begin, even in this life, to see some of the good He is bringing, some of personality that would have remained undeveloped that God wanted to develop, that He developed, through this tragedy.

Five years ago, however, when we lost Jewel’s father to cancer, it was a terrible experience which Jewel passed through. Because it brought up the whole doubt which comes in regards to

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the goodness of God and the will of God. Here her father worked hard all his life and brought up these girls, now at the age of 63, will never have the chance to retire and travel and do all the things he wanted to do and all the things we wanted him to do. To die by cancer, which must be the greatest tragedy and suffering that one can experience in life, you look at that experience and say, “What could God be working out of that?” And I confess that even to this point we have not yet fully even begun to see good from it. We do not yet understand it. We cannot even yet begin to get a hold of it and realize it. It’s not as fresh a wound as it was five years ago, and God has granted a real peace, and granted assurance of His presence in it, so that some of the times of turbulence and doubt have been worked through.

I think in regard to that, there is going to be a full reckoning of the good only when we see the Lord face-to-face and learn from Him the kinds of pitfalls and circumstances that may have been avoided. That the glory will somehow reveal to us the good which God will work in it. This promise of everything working for good is not simply a “this time”-oriented promise. It embraces the totality of God’s being and our existing in eternity with Him, so the fullest dimensions of this will yet be seen in the age to come.

We look at a watch. If we look inside, we’d see some wheels that are going counter-clockwise and other wheels going clockwise. If all you see is the inside of the watch, you’d say, “What a crazy design. Whoever made this up didn’t know what he was doing. He made some wheels to go this way and some wheels to go this way. What kind of crazy contraption is this?” And you don’t realize that everything is working together for good because those wheels going in opposite directions are causing some dials to move in the right direction on the face of the watch.

So it is the experiences in life, that seem to be going counter-clockwise also, that are working for the good. We understand how good experiences can be working for good. When the bills are paid on time and the Internal Revenue has been satisfied and we’ve just moved into a new home

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or just had a new baby, we can understand how God is working the good in that. But it's the counter-clockwise things also that God is working the good in.

II. The goal of the working is for good.

I want to carefully note the difference. While everything is working for the good, the Scripture does not say that everything, of itself, is good. Many things are bad. There are many things in life that happen to us as a result of sin, as the result of Satan's activities, and these are not good. I do not consider death to be good. I do not consider illness to be good. They're tragedies. I'd like to counter some of the teaching that I've heard which says, "If you fall down and break your tooth, get up and smile and say, 'Thank God I broke my tooth!'" I'm not sure I'd put it theologically that way. I would say something like, "I sure am grieved I broke my tooth, and it sure does hurt me now to smile, but I can thank God that somehow He's going to work good out of this."

(Probably, the good will be the money in the dentist's pocket!)

Always be careful, when people go through suffering, that we don't come to them blindly and callously and say to them, "This tragedy that's happened in your life, praise God, it's good."

While giving thanks in everything, we realize that the giving thanks comes through the process of realizing God is going to work for the good.

For example, when Jesus, who is our model, comes to the tomb of Lazarus, how does He confront death? How does He confront people who are grieving? Does He come up and grab Mary and Martha by the shoulders and hug them and dance around with them and say, "It's wonderful! Thank God! Lazarus is dead! Isn't this wonderful?" No. He weeps. He breaks down and cries. He stands at the tomb of Lazarus, and even then He doesn't thank God Lazarus has died. What does He thank God for? He says, "I thank thee that thou hearest Me always." What can we always thank God for? That He hears us.

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Death itself is not good. Of course, it became an opportunity for God to display His glory, like all of our deaths will become an opportunity for God to display His glory when He comes again. But we thank God that He is working good through the process. I think we need to learn to distinguish, therefore, between things that are good, for which we legitimately give thanks, and not thanking God for things which are caused by sin and Satan. But instead, thanking God for what He's doing through them. Because always following the Crucifixion is the Resurrection. God is always working the victory. We learn, as we walk with Christ, that what is happening *in* us is more important than what is happening *to* us.

III. The third thing we see in this text—God is working good in all things—is that there is a limitation or a condition on the working.

The limitations are twofold. On the manward side, our side, it's everything is working together for good, or God is working everything for good for those who love Him. That's our part. The other side of the condition is God is working together everything for good to those who are the called according to His purpose. Take a moment to look at each one of these features.

A. On the manward side, to love God. Look at when we're being called upon to love God. We're called upon to love God in the most difficult time. That is the moment when we are going through the severe difficulty. Everything is working together for good to those who love God. Again, we can thank God when things are going well and it's easy to love God. When He's stroking us. When He's kind of erected an air-conditioned module around our lives. None of the outside environment can get in. But it's quite another matter when adversity strikes—and that is the point which tests and challenges our love for God.

We say, when we go through a time of difficulty, "How could God have allowed this?" And what is the tendency when we go through tragedy? To become bitter and angry and resentful toward God. That is precisely the moment when it is the most difficult. When we are feeling

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angry and we want to shake our fist at God. When we feel like God has a flyswatter in the heavens, and He's looking for people. And all of a sudden, He's decided to use the flyswatter on us, and "squash" go our dreams and our aspirations and our loved ones.

So how do we get around this? How can we love God when the stuffing of life has been knocked out of us? I think to get a handle on this, again, we have to look at our example, Jesus Christ, who shows us the way to go. What does Jesus do on the cross? How is Jesus—when He hangs there—how is He able to love God? Is He able to turn up to God and say, "God, I thank You for the cross." If the cross is the end of Christ's experience, then He could not thank God for the cross. But if the cross is a part of the process God is using to bring Him into greater glory, then He can thank God for the cross, and, therefore, He can love God.

If we cannot love God when we're going through difficulty, if that difficulty brings down the curtain, if there is nothing after that, if there is no brighter picture—if, when that thing happens, that closes things out, then it's impossible to love God. Because we closed our face of existence on the bleak side, on the dark side, on the defeat side. It's only possible to love God if we see that—beneath and beyond and above and supportive—are the everlasting arms of God.

Christ is able to love God on the cross, the Father who has sent Him for this purpose, because through the eye of faith in His humanity, He sees on the cross that before Him is the glory that God is working out even this for the good. Christ certainly, in His human mortality, must have been tempted to wonder if God was working for the good as He hanged there in the agony of the cross.

So we love God in the difficulty because we recognize that this is not the end, that more is coming. It is, again, the contrast between the then and the now. So the condition that God asks of us as we're going through difficulty is—rather than turning and becoming resentful and angry and bitter with God—to just wait, to hold on. As we've indicated in times past, God always

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comes up to bat in the last of the ninth inning. And it doesn't matter what the score is. At that point in the game, you know He's going to hit a grand slam home run that at least wins by three runs! More than enough. We are more than conquerors.

B. There is a condition on the Godward side of things, however. The condition on our part of everything working together for good is that we love God. The condition on God's side is that we are the called according to His purpose.

There are two ideas associated with the word "called." I called someone on the phone last night, and they weren't there. Nobody answered the phone. I called, and nobody answered. It's quite another thing when I call and get an answer. That's the meaning here of being called. It's what the theologians call the effectual calling of the saints. It means that when God called us, you didn't just leave the phone ringing. You picked it up, and you answered: "Here am I, Lord." Or when Christ knocked on the door, we didn't just leave Him banging out there. We opened the door. That's the meaning of the gospel text that says, "Many are called, but few are chosen." It's another way of saying, "I called many, but only a few have really been called. That is the ones who answered the call."

Now to give breath to this meaning of what it is to be called, Paul then gives five verbs which describes the calling process. He takes us from eternity past to the present to eternity future. He says in eternity past, God foreknew. He predestined. Then in the present, He called. And now He has justified, and, furthermore, He has glorified—past tense again. Which takes us to eternity future. So in this whole stream of eternity linking together with time, we know from eternity past and eternity future that God has called us because He's done certain things. He has foreknown, predestined. He has called, justified, and glorified us.

You say, "That doesn't bring me any comfort. That just brings me a whole lot of theological problems." Foreknew and predestined. You can choke on those words. I always did like Romans

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8:28, but what in the world is Romans 8:29 and 30? I just don't know. Have you ever felt that way towards this verse? Romans 8:28, your favorite verse in the Bible, and Romans 8:29 and 30 are your least favorite. What does this mean?

Let's look at the meaning of the words and see what it means and doesn't mean. The word "foreknow" literally means to know beforehand. In the New Testament, the word is used some seven times. Five times it relates to God. Always, it means that God knows beforehand what's going to happen. A clear example of this is in Acts 2:33 where Christ, according to Peter's preaching, was delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God. That means the cross did not surprise God the Father. He knew it was going to happen. He didn't wake up all of a sudden one morning and find that Christ had been crucified. He knew it. He was the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world.

The second word is the word "predestine." That causes us a lot of problems. It literally is a combination of two words. It means the horizon of what you can see. So "before the horizon" means you can see everything before that line out there, and everything beyond that horizon you can't see. So our lives are before God's horizon. Since He has foreknown us, He has, before His horizon, chosen some things about us. What He has chosen is that we should be conformed to the image of His Son.

Does God, from the beginning of eternity, know what His Son is going to look like and be like when He's finished with His pilgrimage on earth? I think He does. He knows how that image is going to turn out. He knows today. Christ is at His right hand. Then if God knows what Jesus is going to be, how about, also, those of us who are the sons and daughters of God through Jesus Christ? Does He not know us as well? Scripture is saying, "Yes, He does." God stands outside of time and space, and sees us and knows our destiny.

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We say, “This greatly troubles me. It bothers me that God would know that much about me. He ought to limit His future knowledge. How can I really be free if He knows that much about me?” Here’s where we really get hung up in the problems in regard to God. I’ll counter this in just a moment, but I want to say this about that. There is such a thing in following God as what I would call mystery. There are some doctrines I don’t understand. I have yet to hear a doctrine that fully explains all the mysteries in the nature of God—that is, for example, adequately describes how God is one, and God is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. What do we do as Christians? We accept the testimony of Scripture. We say, “That’s on God’s level of being. I don’t understand it, but the Scriptures reveal it, and I commit myself in faith to it.”

The divine sovereignty of God and our human freedom are another case in point. We don’t understand how the two can fully relate to us. They seem to be an apparent contradiction. But I’m so grateful, as a Christian, I serve a God who somehow is greater than my ability to mentally define Him and to categorize Him and say completely, “This is what God is.” Somehow if I could get Him down to the peanut level of my mind, then I have made God an idol. I’ve just done something to Him that is foreign to His character and identity. So it shouldn’t trouble us that there should be something about God I don’t understand. That I don’t understand things about God is proof that I’m serving the right One, I think. If I get everything boiled down like some of the cults and sects do, then I’d be a little worried about that. They’ve got it all figured out too neatly.

How does God look at us? The thing about God is He can not only look from our vantage point, but He can look into the future. I got to thinking of when my little girl was born. I remember I was pacing the floor in the waiting room, half praying, half passed out with anxiety, and watching Batman all at the same time. Finally, the nurse comes out and says, “You have a baby girl, and here she is,” and they hand her to me. I still see that picture of the way she was, the

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baby when she was born. But I don't know ten, fifteen years from now what she's going to look like. But I always have that tender association with her because I knew what she looked like when she was born.

When God looks at us like we're in the future, He doesn't see us like we are right now. He sees us as perfect in Christ Jesus. And His feelings are so positive about us because He already sees us complete in Christ. We are to be conformed to the image of His Son. And there's no more lovable a person in all of creation, no more perfect person, than Jesus Christ. And that's who we're going to be like forever and ever.

So God wants us to be in heaven for the sake of His Son. He sees us before the limits of His horizon and He says, "I want you to be conformed to the image of My Son in order that My Son might be the firstborn among many brothers." "Firstborn" means the preeminent one. Wouldn't it be a tragedy if Jesus came to the earth and lived and taught and died, crucified, and rose again, and nobody became the sons and daughters of God through Him? He just came back up to heaven all alone. What kind of glory and preeminence would that be? It would seem like a vain task. He did all that for nothing.

But He didn't do it all for nothing. Because we're going to be there as well, enhancing His stature, His image, His glory as the eternal Son of God. We are destined to be conformed to the image of His Son in order for what purpose? To further glorify and magnify the Son of God.

Given all those things, let me add a footnote on foreknowledge and predestination. We'll take a moment to say what the Scripture does not teach about foreknowledge and predestination. Two things it doesn't teach.

It does not teach that you do not have freedom of will because God knows. Here's where we get into trouble on this subject. Because inevitably there will be those on this side of the theological spectrum that say, "God knows, so you can't be free." And there are those that say, "If you're

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free, God can't know." So they invent the game of cosmic chess. God doesn't know from one day to the next what's going to happen, so it all depends on you. So on the other side, you have the group that says, "I sure hope God doesn't push me down that flight of steps again today."

You've got both sides. But the Scriptures fully teach that God knows, and I'm free.

Furthermore, the Scriptures do not teach predestination in respect to damnation. This is not a Scripture that God has a Russian roulette gun, and at the beginning of eternity He loaded, and He aimed, at the mass of humanity. Some got hit for salvation, and the rest got hit for damnation.

Never does the Scripture teach that in regard to predestination or foreknowledge.

Often as Christians, we're robbed of the comfort of these words because we get these philosophical concepts attached to them and thrust things into the Scriptures that Scriptures aren't teaching. I think D. L. Moody put the relationship best when he said, "The 'whosoever wills' are the elect, and the 'whosoever will nots' are not elect. The Lord voted for my salvation, the devil voted for my damnation, and I voted with the Lord and we got a majority." That's where I have to leave this doctrine.

Look at what it does mean. It means that each one of us in this room in Christ, none of us are an accident. The chances of you biologically emerging—the chances of the distinct personality that is you emerging from conception—range mathematically from one chance to two chances in a hundred million. That is the chance of you being you. Yet there's no chance with God. God has known. You may have felt like a human accident, but from God's point of view there're no human accidents. There is purpose to life. Furthermore, in us being foreknown and predetermined by God, God has never varied in His feeling toward you. In fact, Paul takes us right up into heaven by using verbs that are in the past tense. Notice the word "glorified" is in the past tense. We'd think if Paul were writing correctly, he'd say, "Those whom He called He also justified, and those whom He justified He shall also glorify." Future tense. Or they "are being

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glorified.” Present tense. No. It’s “glorified”—past tense—as though it had already happened. That’s because he’s writing from God’s perspective in this matter, and the outcome of our salvation in God’s eye is certain.

Think for a moment. When you appear before the throne of God as a believer, and Jesus Christ rises to greet you as He did Stephen, what do you think the Lord’s going to say to you? Is He going to say, “George Wood, what a surprise to see you here! I didn’t even know you existed. No, I knew you existed, but I wasn’t sure you were going to make it here.” We know what the Lord’s going to say: “I’ve been waiting for you! I’ve been building this mansion for you over here. Come enter into the joy. Well done, good and faithful!” Jesus is going to say, “My intention was to make you like Myself.”

That’s a great comfort. It holds us in a time of adversity. It doesn’t matter how our feelings are, how others’ feelings are towards us, what the circumstances are. God has fixed feelings toward us. And that includes right till the end of time. He’s glorified us. So He’s saying to us, “You’re not a momentary person.” Paul is disagreeing with Shakespeare, who said, “Life is but a shadow, a poor player who struts his hour upon the stage and then is heard no more.” Shakespeare said, “It’s a talk by an idiot full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.” Not so, says the apostle. No man can say this who has been justified and glorified by God.

Just as the oak is in the acorn, so the “eternal you” is present in the “now you,” and you’re developing toward that target point that God has destined for you to be in Christ. Therefore, everything is working together for good. What are the two conditions? We love God precisely at the moment it’s most difficult. And we are the called according to His purpose. God’s role in this, and our role, is like my teaching my boy how to ride a bicycle. If you’re going to teach a kid how to ride a bike, get out on the street and they start heading down the road. When you’re teaching them how to ride a bike, you don’t just say, “Hold the handlebars straight,” and then

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give them a great big push and shout, “Good luck!” You keep running behind them with your hand on the bike all the time, lest they fall.

The Father is kind of like that in regards to us with life. He’s not left us to run this race alone. Like a Father, He truly has His hand on the guidance system of our life. And He is not going to leave us. No, He will never leave us alone. He is not going to say to us some cheery thing after we have given our lives to Christ: “Good luck. Hope you make it. You’re on your own.” He’s running along behind us, sometimes ahead of us. But He’s going to insure that we keep going. So underneath and in between and all around are the everlasting arms of God—so that we might realize this intention that God has for all the circumstances of life. We can have an unflinching faith. God is going to work for good because we’ve met our condition.

There is so little said about our condition—just for us to love God. And there’s two whole verses about what God’s going to do. That’s because, I think, of our misemphases. For that time of danger, that time of affliction, we sometimes get the monkey on our back and we say, “Now I’ve really got to come through for God.” And we forget that at that time, God’s going to come through for us. And God’s got a whole lot more to do with getting us through than we have ourselves.

It’s meant as an assurance to us. That’s why these tremendously important words are used.

They’re not meant to become theological battlegrounds. They’re not meant to torment Christians—to divide up into camps of preknowledge, predestination, and the like. They’re used to give us assurance and peace on the way. It’s another way of saying, “God’s for us. God knows. God’s with you. You’re going to make it.”