

Chosen & Changing

Romans 8:28-30

This is one of the most important passages in Scripture. And it is also one of the most misunderstood. Here is something “We KNOW” to be true: **all things work together for good.** We know this. Everything is going to work out. In the end, we will look back and see how even the hardest things in our lives were for our good and God’s glory.

But does this mean that ***everything that happens to us IS good?*** No! Bad things happen. Evil, terrible, twisted things happen. Some of you were abused as children. Some of you have experienced terrible pain in your marriages or other relationships. Many of us are dealing with illness and the brokenness of our bodies as things deteriorate. None of this is good. None of it was a part of God’s original creation nor will it be a part of the new heaven and earth we’ll enjoy with Him forever. So this passage does not teach that everything that happens to us is good.

What this passage does *not* teach:

- Everything that happens to us is good
- Everything in the life of a Christian will eventually feel good (if you just...)

It also does not mean that ***everything in the life of a Christian will eventually feel good.*** This is maybe the worst understanding and application of this passage - as if it teaches that your life should be good in terms of health and wealth and happiness. And if it isn’t, then you aren’t loving God enough. Or you aren’t trusting God enough or praying hard enough.

Hear me, brothers and sisters, this passage is teaching neither of those things. It is not downplaying the very real evil and suffering in the world and glossing it as good. Nor does this teach us that our lives will be all sunshine and roses once we learn to trust Jesus enough. Paul has JUST WRITTEN how “the Spirit intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words” (v. 26). This world is groaning as in the pains of childbirth. We are groaning as we feel the effects of a broken and sin-filled world.

And back in verse 18 Paul wrote, “I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us” (v. 18). ***Glory is coming, but right now we will endure suffering.*** Jesus did not say, “In this world you will have nothing but peace and happiness.” He said, “In this world you will have... trouble.” That’s the same word in v. 35 for “tribulation,” and can also be translated “trials.”

“And if children, then heirs—heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him. For I consider that the sufferings of this

present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us.” Romans 8:17-18

Listen to the clear teaching of v. 17 - “If we are children, then we are heirs - heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, **provided we suffer with him** in order that we may also be glorified with him.”

Our future is GLORY. Those who belong to Jesus will be glorified with him one day. Our eternal reality will be glory, joy, peace, and rest. But our present is not yet glory. Our present involves suffering with Jesus. At the end of our lives, as we enjoy eternity in the glorious presence of our Lord, we will look back on everything in this life and see it as “light and momentary afflictions” that aren’t even worth comparing to the “glory that will be revealed in us.”

But **right now our afflictions don’t feel light or momentary.** And if we glance ahead at the end of Romans 8, which we’ll get to next week, try to imagine what the believers in Rome were about to face. Paul wrote this letter around AD 57, just a few years after Nero had become Emperor, at the ripe age of 16. In AD 59 Nero had his mother executed in a “shipwreck” and his reign started to go crazy after that, without her influence. His paranoia and mania built until AD 64 when many historians believe he ordered the burning of Rome and then blamed it on Christians to deflect responsibility from himself.

AD 64 was one of the first great **persecutions in the early church** with many arrested, “thrown to the beasts, crucified or burned alive.” And it was in Rome in AD 69, according to tradition on the very same day, that both Peter and Paul were executed.

So when Paul writes, in AD 57, “**Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword?**” Romans 8:35, he is not writing figuratively, but **quite literally.** Peter spent the final months of his life in the notorious Mamertine Prison, suffering both torture and neglect, before finally being crucified upside down in Nero’s Circus. Paul, we know from his letters, spent many of his final years under house arrest or in various prison cells, before he was beheaded.

So this passage is NOT teaching us that everything will turn out rosy if you just believe or sing Josh Groban loud enough. So **what is Paul teaching here?** He is giving us **a lifeline of TRUTH to hold on to in suffering.** This is a cord of three strands - three powerful statements of truth that weave together into an unbreakable cord. We’ll see God’s plan, God’s purpose and God’s promise in each successive verse. So the unifying truth to hold on to in the midst of trials and tribulations is the character of God. He is good. He is loving. He is with you. He will carry you through! Hold on to that!

First, in verse 28 we see that God’s plan for us is good.

Lifelines of truth for times of trial:

1. God's Plan for us is Good

*“And we know that for those who love God **all things work together for good**, for those who are called according to his purpose.” Romans 8:28*

Hear those first words - “And we know.” This is not wishful thinking or positive but empty believing. We do not agree with Mark Twain when he says: “Faith is believing what you know ain't so.” God does not ask us to hold fast to baseless assertions. No, He gives us rock solid truth and says, “Hold on to this.”

“And we know.” What do we know? The central truth in verse 28 is that “all things work together for good.” Again, this does not teach that all things that happen ARE good. The Bible is a profoundly realistic book that acknowledges both the good in this world as it was originally created and the evil in this world as a result of the fall.

But we KNOW that whatever happens, **God is in control**. The only reason we can know for sure that all things will work together for good is because we know the One who is directing all things to their appointed ends. God is the Great Conductor of the symphony of history. At certain points we hear and feel terribly discordant notes - a cacophony of chaos and pain. At other times the music of life swells in a glorious, harmonious celebration.

But all the time God is playing the role of conductor. He never takes a break, He never sleeps, He never looks away. “All things work together for good.” All things. There is not a single thing that has ever happened, that is happening now or that will happen in the future that is outside of God's loving, sovereign control.

Consider Job - whose suffering far surpassed anything you and I have ever been through. In a single day he lost all of his possessions, all of his livelihood, his career and his wealth. On that same day all ten of his children were killed in a sudden windstorm. Not long after he was afflicted with a miserably painful illness.

Here is the key passage in Job 1:

God is Always in Control:

*“Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked shall I return. The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord.’ **In all this Job did not sin or charge God with wrong.**” Job 1:21-22*

Now Job didn't know what was happening in the spiritual realm, but the Scripture writer pulls back the curtain so we can see. It was Satan who caused these calamities. But it was God who allowed them, placing specific limits upon them. And Job was right when he said, “The Lord gave,

and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord.” He did not make the mistake we so often make in our suffering. He did not “charge God with wrong.”

Job gives us an illustration of Romans 8:28. All things in Job’s life worked together not only for his good - but also for OUR GOOD, so that people throughout history have drawn insight and comfort from the experience of Job. **God had a plan for Job.** In the midst of the pain, grief and sorrow we have 30 some chapters of Job’s lament as he cries out the injustice of his situation. But the writer shows us the beginning and the end of the story and the point is to encourage all of God’s people that God does have a plan - and His plan for us is good.

Consider Israel. Talk about a crazy story of dramatic ups and downs. Start with **Abraham and Sarai**, an elderly couple that couldn’t have kids. Why did God make them wait nearly 25 years before the birth of Isaac? Infertility is not good. It is one of the evil effects of the fall - and it was very much seen as a curse in those days, not a blessing. But God had a plan for the good of Abraham and Sarah and the whole world - a plan that culminated in the birth of Isaac when Abraham was almost 100 years old (and Sarah was 90)!

Think about the 400 years God’s people were in Egypt - the latter part when they were slaves, brutally driven. In the midst of those trials, and certainly at the edge of the Red Sea with Pharaoh’s mighty army bearing down on them, the people struggled to believe that God had good plans for them. But we would be missing a key moment in God’s miraculous deliverance if He had thrown the wheels off the chariots while they were still back in Egypt. God had a plan to part the Red Sea and show the world the limitless nature of His power to save.

One more example - the exile. As a punishment for their constant rebellion and idolatry, God sent the Israelites into exile in Babylon. They were refugees and slaves in a foreign land - subject to all the abuses and dangers of these vulnerable states. But **God had a plan for the good of Israel** - to teach them and train them and refine them. Listen to Jeremiah 29 -

God is Always in Control:

“Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom ***I have sent into exile*** from Jerusalem to Babylon...***For I know the plans I have for you***, declares the Lord, ***plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope.***” Jeremiah 29:4,11

God is in control of everything that happens. Even the very worst things God limits and directs and redeems as part of His good plan. Never make the mistake of charging God with doing evil - He is never responsible for evil, for God’s nature defines what is good, holy, righteous and just. We are simply not in a position high enough or wise enough to judge God and the final outworking of His plans.

And so the challenge for us is to believe what the Bible teaches: that God's plans for us are good. He is at work in your life. All things - in YOUR LIFE - will work together for good. Probably not right away. Maybe never in this life. But God is working a perfect plan for you.

Let's go to verse 29 to see His purpose.

Lifelines of truth for times of trial:

2. God's Purpose for us is Growth

*"For those whom he foreknew he also predestined **to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers.**" Romans 8:29*

This is the primary GOOD God has planned for us - "to be conformed to the image of his Son." **God is shaping us**, chiseling away our rough, sinful edges and molding us more and more into the image of Christ. His purpose is to help us grow more and more into Christ - to increasingly reflect the glory of Christ in His holiness, righteousness, goodness and love.

Imagine a potter shaping clay. When the clay is new it is soft and easily molded so the potter can gently and smoothly fashion it into whatever shape he desires. But later the clay gets harder and settles into a firm shape. Before long the clay becomes like rock. Then the only way the potter can shape it is to use a hammer and chisel - or to throw the whole thing into the fire and melt it down again.

But the Potter's purpose is to shape the clay **into something useful, something beautiful.** This is God's purpose for us - to make us into beautiful, radiant reflections of Jesus Christ Himself. God is gathering a family - so that Jesus will be the firstborn among many brothers. And we all share a family likeness - we are becoming more and more like our big brother, Jesus.

Do you feel the strength of these lifelines? God's plan for us is good. We can trust that He is in control and He is working toward good ends. Second, God's purpose for us is growth. He is shaping us increasingly into the image of Jesus. **This can be painful, but it is purposeful.** Nothing is wasted. All things work together for our good, since we have been called according to His purpose.

But here I want to pause to raise the question - **does this apply to YOU?** This struck me as I studied the passage this week - the repetition of a specific phrase six times in three verses:

*"And we know that for **those who** love God... for **those who** are called according to his purpose. For **those whom** he foreknew... And **those whom** he predestined he also called, and **those whom** he called he also justified, and **those whom** he justified he also glorified." Romans 8:28-30*

God's plan, God's purpose and God's promise here apply to a specific group of people. Those who love God, who are called according to his purpose; those he foreknew, predestined, called, justified and glorified.

Does this describe you? Are you defined and directed by your love for God? Does your heart beat for Jesus? Is your life oriented around God's purposes and plans? Can you remember when God called your name? Can you point to a time when you experienced the justifying grace of God so that you can see a time before Jesus and how different you have been after Jesus took over? Do you know that you belong to the Lord - that you are His?

The point of this reflection is not to say "Yay for me - I'm one of the elect!" The point is that your heart should overflow with gratitude as you say, "Praise the Lord - of all the people on earth, for only His mysterious and gracious reasons, He chose ME!"

Peter writes:

"Be all the more diligent to confirm your calling and election, for if you practice these qualities you will never fall." 2 Peter 1:10

Peter had just rattled off a list of virtues - faith, knowledge, self-control, discipline, godliness and love - and exhorted the believers to pursue these virtues in an increasing measure. If you see this kind of fruit growing in your life, that is how to CONFIRM your calling and election. Don't agonize over the question - "Am I elect?" Rather, develop a living relationship with God, rooted in His word and obeying His Spirit so that you will ***increasingly see the fruit of the Spirit in your life!***

Then the Holy Spirit Himself will "bear witness with your Spirit that you are a child of God."

"The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God." Romans 8:16

So here's the deal with predestination. The only person you can know for sure is a Christian is YOU. The Holy Spirit can't bear witness in your spirit for anyone but you. You should hopefully see fruit in the life of your spouse, your children and your close friends that gives you good reason to believe they belong to Jesus - but, hear this - you cannot know for sure. Look at the person next to you and say, **"I don't know about you, buddy."**

Do you know what ***the final test is for a true believer?*** They finish. They run the race to the finish line. They will trip and fall a few times, they will get sidetracked now and then - but they never quit the race. They get up when they fall down. They come back when they go astray. They keep... on... running... Listen to how John says it:

True Believers Finish:

"They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us. But they went out, that it might become plain that they all are not of us." 1 John 2:19

Now I believe it is true that **“once you are saved you are always saved.”** That is a true statement. But ***I don't think it's a helpful one***, because the only one you can know that for sure about is yourself. And you can only have that assurance if you are currently walking in the truth. If you start living a life of rebellion against God and living in the world, don't delude yourself into thinking, “I was once saved so I'll always be saved.” The mark of someone who was truly saved is that she keeps on living like a child of God - no matter what happens - for the rest of her life.

The parable of the sower teaches us that someone can look a lot like a Christian - especially soon after they hear the gospel - but not actually be a Christian. They can receive the word with joy and look like a nice new Jesus-follower plant. But then the thorns start growing around them and the sun starts beating down on them and their “faith” shrivels up and dies.

That does not describe a believer who was once saved and therefore is always saved. That describes a false, shallow profession of faith. That little plant with no root is someone who never truly counted the cost of following Jesus and never really gave his heart to Christ. The sign that you did truly commit to Christ is that NOTHING can tear you away from him. Nothing.

If you know someone who used to follow Jesus - in the past they used to sing praises to Jesus, read their Bible, even share the gospel with others - but they don't do any of that anymore. Hear this. ***The Bible gives no assurance of salvation to a person who is not actively, currently walking with Jesus.***

The Bible gives no assurance of salvation to a person who is not walking with Jesus.

I'm not saying that walking with Jesus gets you saved or keeps you saved - I'm saying that **walking with Jesus is the sign that you ARE saved**. Not walking with Jesus - for an extended period of time - is a sign that a person is NOT saved. That is a hard reality to process, especially if the person in your mind is a son or daughter, grandson or granddaughter or other loved one.

But I'm not doing you any favors to tell you a sugar-coated lie. And you're not doing that loved one any favors if you tell them “it doesn't matter about going to church or reading your Bible or any of that - you're fine! You prayed to receive Jesus when you were 7, remember?”

For the person who shows no spiritual interest, no love for the Lord - it doesn't matter what signs there were in the past, that person is in trouble. One theologian would say, “he was never saved.” Another would say, “he lost his salvation.” But both would agree - that guy is in trouble. Neither would say, “once saved, always saved!”

True believers persevere. They endure to the end. They finish the race. They overcome even the most severe trials and tribulations. And they do it by holding on to lifelines like these. God's plan

for us is good. God's purpose for us is growth. He is shaping and molding us into the image of Christ. Having wayward children or grandchildren may be the most difficult suffering you have to endure. This may be how God is heating up the furnace of your life and chipping off some of your unbelief, some of your desire to be in control.

Hold on to the truth in this passage - God does have a plan. He does have a purpose. He is shaping you and He is at work in the life of your loved one. Keep praying for that loved one to come back to the Lord. Keep gently and lovingly raising the issue and praying that the Lord will bring other people and other influences into their lives. Ultimately it's an issue of trust for you, just as it is for them. So trust in God's purpose and plan. And keep your eyes looking up to our eternal future. This is the third lifeline: God's promise for us is glory.

Lifelines of truth for times of trial:

3. God's Promise for us is Glory

*"And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified **he also glorified.**" Romans 8:30*

How striking that the final phrase is in the past tense. "Those whom he justified he also glorified." Past. Completed action. That moment of glorification is in your future - when you die or Jesus comes back. But it is so sure, so certain, so fixed in God's mind that Paul can state it as a fact as accomplished as your calling and justification, which were clearly completed in the past.

To be glorified is to be fully and completely fashioned into the image of Christ. All of your sin and temptation will be forever removed. All of Jesus' goodness and glory will be realized in you. What we now reflect very dimly will suddenly blaze with clarity, like the sun breaking through dark storm clouds.

Here are lifelines we can hold on to in any storm. God's plan for us is good. God's purpose for us is growth. God's promise for us is glory. He who started this work in us will bring it to completion!

- God chose you, before the creation of the world to be adopted as his son or daughter - he will bring you home one day!
- God called your name when you were a blind, straying sheep - lost in a dark world - the Good Shepherd will heal all of your wounds one day!
- Jesus died to pay for your sins, He will rid you of them completely one day!
- Those whom he justified he also glorified!

Now please watch this testimony from our oldest son, Seth.

SETH VIDEO

Long-Awaited Victory

Seth Anderson

Hey, everyone. My name's Seth. I'm Darin's firstborn if you didn't know that. I'd like to share a little of my story and how I've experienced the reality of Romans 8:28 - "God works all things together for good for those who love Him."

My story starts with running, like all tragic tales of woe. I had this genius idea to join the Cross Country team at my new high school in the name of social connections and physical fitness. Kids, don't make the mistake I did. There's no good reason to sprint unless a clown is chasing you.

Anyway, I was a terrible runner to start, but as the season dragged on, I started having frequent bouts of diarrhea. That didn't improve my running skills but it did fill me with an ever-present fear of soiling my pants. It worsened and worsened over the next couple weeks, and eventually I started bleeding a lot whenever I used the toilet... when I told my parents about that, we jumped in the Ander-Van and drove to the pediatrician. He sent me to a GI specialist named Dr. Guna who suspected a disease called Ulcerative Colitis. I had my first colonoscopy (of many) to confirm that diagnosis. Sure enough, that wonderful experience typically reserved for 70 year olds showed that my teenage body was slowly self-destructing.

Treatment started with a steroid pill called Prednisone. Prednisone is commonly used to stop inflammation when people are afflicted with poison ivy or another skin irritation. The only thing Prednisone changed for me was my face. It puffed up like Theodore the chipmunk within a couple weeks and broke out in horrendous, pustulent acne a little while after that - think of a topographical map of the Rockies and you get the general picture. So that was fantastic. And it wasn't slowing or stopping the Colitis. At all.

So I started taking Methylprednisolone - Prednisone's bigger, nastier brother. My symptoms finally started to improve, but at a very severe cost. My body starting ripping itself apart with stretch marks that looked like someone had slashed a knife across my legs and back. My tongue turned white and I couldn't really taste anything. But the most vicious side effects were psychological.

I started feeling agitated, thought someone was watching me when nobody was around. That irrational paranoia evolved into fear that something of someone was waiting to kill me. I completely lost my social filter, so I would randomly snap, clap, and click my tongue in public. My memory is still a little fuzzy around this time, but my good friends up north have reminded me of some of the more memorable outbursts of my alter-ego they lovingly dubbed, "Psycho-Seth."

The mental problems were terrifying because I knew that the medicine was responsible for screwing up my brain, but I had to keep taking it to control the bleeding. Eventually my mind got so sick that I started hallucinating. I'd wake up in the middle of the night and the whole ceiling of my room would be moving as if it was covered with thousands of glistening, malevolent spiders.

This was without a doubt the darkest, most terrifying, and crushingly real time of my life. I knew I was a Christian, but it felt like God was punishing me. There didn't seem to be a reason for my suffering and there were plenty of times when I thought suicide would be an easier route to take than the seemingly endless path of pain from disease and psychosis.

This was the first time that I related to David's cries of desperation, as in Psalm 13: "**How long** must I take counsel in my soul and have sorrow in my heart all the day? **How long** shall my enemy be exalted over me? Consider and answer me, O Lord my God; light up my eyes, lest I sleep the sleep of death... But I have trusted in your steadfast love; my heart shall rejoice in your salvation."

After several months of increasingly difficult physical and psychological problems where I had to stay home from school, struggling with my mom and a tutor to finish my sophomore year, Dr. Guna finally recommended surgery. This summer will be the two year anniversary of when a colorectal surgeon removed my entire large intestine - the biology books call it your Colon and it turns out it's fairly important.

When I woke up from surgery, I had an ostomy bag applied to my torso - basically, my small intestine was hanging out of my abdomen, constantly expelling waste, and I had no way to control it - so I had to have a bag stuck to me to catch the feces and I had to empty it every few hours. It was a disgusting and humiliating task, but I was able to get off of the Methylprednisolone, so my mind and body slowly returned to normal, which was an enormous blessing and answer to prayer.

I was also able to return to school, which was a blessing and a curse. It was embarrassing to be the junior that everyone had forgotten existed during my 6 month absence. 11th grade is tough enough without the social awkwardness of rebuilding relationships, and the physical difficulty of dealing with an ileostomy. My family, friends, and teachers were all very supportive and encouraging, and I can't thank them enough for that.

My faith, however, really suffered during that season of drought and struggle. While I was desperate and longed for God while my mind and body were in shambles, I didn't feel like a relationship with him was much of a priority once I started recovering. I resented God for allowing my disease and suffering, and I blamed him for the opportunities that I'd lost because of the illness and surgery. I felt like I couldn't forgive God for what he had put me through.

I had my second surgery in November of 2016, in which the surgeon took the last few feet of my small intestine and wrapped it around itself - to build what they call a J-Pouch. This pouch, they told me, would learn to absorb water and function as a colon-esque reservoir over time. The tissue needed a few months to adjust to its new position before I could use it, so I continued with my ostomy bag until the final surgery in February of last year.

The surgeon ultimately shoved my ostomy back inside my gut and attached my recovering J-Pouch to the normal human waste-disposal zone. The doctor and nurses assured me that I would be back to functioning like a normal teenager after a couple months, so I was genuinely excited and optimistic for literally the first time in years. Unfortunately, my immune system decided that it would be fun to attack

my J-Pouch for a while, just like old times, so I was still dashing to the bathroom a dozen times a day for the better part of last year.

Towards the end of the summer, my dad received a call from this church in Tampa called Oakwood and we made plans to relocate to the Promised Land of Florida. I was happy about this great new opportunity, but I also felt a degree of regret and loss when we moved. I'd made some of the best friends I've ever had in Chicago, and they were with me through the hardest years of my life. I was angry with God for taking away the stable and secure life that would've been mine had I graduated in Illinois, gone to a school in the Midwest with my friends, and lived my life without much more drama or sacrifice.

That wasn't God's plan though, and we moved down at the end of August. For my first several weeks and months here, I continued to struggle with dominating feelings of injustice, depression, and outrage towards God. I tried to isolate myself from him, going through the motions of church without desiring a relationship with my Savior. It took me a long time and plenty of sleepless nights to finally reach a point of surrender and renewed commitment to following Christ.

I wish I had let God work in and change me sooner, but the truth of Romans 8 is that his timing and plan are perfect, even when we are slow to trust him and slow to respond to his Spirit. His plan for our lives is good, and his purpose for our lives is growth. Looking back, I can definitely see how God was changing me and those around me for the better. Frankly, I used to be an egotistical jerk and felt like I was superior to my peers and family. I doubt the person I am today would be friends with who I was before UC.

It's really kind of sad that a chronic disease, hallucinations, surgery, and a long recovery were necessary to alter my stubborn, bitter heart. Now, however, I can honestly say along with Paul that, "all things work together for good, for those who love God and are called according to his purpose." (Romans 8:28) God used Ulcerative Colitis, Methylprednisolone, an ileostomy, a cross-country move and tons of hormonal teenage emotion to make me more like Jesus. It was painful, obviously, but I see now that it was purposeful. I've learned to truly place my trust in my Creator and I'm still growing as a person and as a follower of Christ. I hope my story encourages you to place more faith in God's purposes and plans for your life - even if right now you are walking through the valley of the shadow of death.

Conclusion

Prayer

And we know that

for those who **love God**
all things work together for good,
for those who are **called** according to **his purpose**.

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**.

And those whom he **predestined**
he also **called**,
and those whom he **called**
he also **justified**,
and those whom he **justified**
he also glorified.