

We Have Assurance

Romans 8:28-30

Human endurance is an amazing thing. We can endure a lot, if we know it's going somewhere, if it accomplishes something, if it achieves some purpose. Russian cosmonaut Valeri Polyakov spent an astounding 438 days living in space. Randy Gardner, just a high school student at the time, stayed awake without stimulants for 264 hours straight. That's more than 11 days. I have a hard time staying awake 11 hours.

In 2012, Kim Allan ran continuously for 86 hours, setting a record she failed to break the previous year. That failed attempt cost her all of her toenails. Even more astounding, she was 47 years old when she did it. How about Stig Severinsen, who spent a full 22 minutes under water without air or breathing apparatus? Australian Fergal Fleming went 41 minutes without blinking her eyes.

Most of these accomplishments were for research, to test the limits of human capability, or to set world records. But even in our ordinary, everyday lives, we can endure a lot, if we have the assurance of some sort of payoff at the end.

Athletes train through tremendous pain and injury because they hope to achieve victory, hit a milestone or set a personal best. Students endure hours of study, endless late nights of writing papers, and the stress of exams just to make the grade and reach a higher goal, whether it's getting into the right college, qualifying for a program, winning a scholarship, or getting the job they want.

A woman goes through all the trials and aches and pains of nine months of pregnancy. Then she endures the incredible pain of childbirth, not to mention the huge toll it takes on her body. Why? To bring about the miracle of birth, to bring a new life into this world and to love and be loved.

We go through seasons in our careers where the demands are high, the expectations higher, the hours are long, and the stress stretches us to the breaking point, but we see it through to get the job done, to get the deal, to secure the client, to not let the team down. We care for sick loved ones through seemingly endless months and years. It is exhausting on the body and the soul, but we do it out of love. We do it to honor our commitment and because we have the assurance that they would do the same for us.

We come today to one of the most loved verses in all of the Bible, one of the most quoted, most memorized, most posted, most printed verses on everything from wall art to tee shirts to coffee mugs. This verse is so loved because it offers us such assurance. It assures us that everything we endure has meaning and purpose. Romans 8:28,

²⁸ 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.

Whose Definition of Good?

Of all the benefits and blessings of belonging to Jesus that Paul discusses in Romans 8, this is the most treasured assurance for many Christians, and yet it is essential that we understand this verse in its proper context. We quote just verse 28, but we need to understand verse 28

along with verses 29 through 30.

When it says *“God works for the good of those who love him,”* we sometimes make the mistake of defining *good* in our own terms -what feels good, especially what feels good right now, that which is the most convenient, or what makes sense to me. But God isn’t assuring us that we will get the job we want, or that our investments will do well, that we will score high enough on the test, or the MRI will come back negative. That is not the definition of good Paul uses in this passage.

So let’s listen to this verse in its fuller context, and then we can do a breakdown of what it’s telling us. Remember in the verses we saw last week, Paul was talking about our present sufferings– the struggles and weaknesses we go through in our lives right now. Paul then promises us that the Holy Spirit within us is interceding before God the Father on our behalf. All the things that weigh on your heart that you can’t even find the words to express, the Holy Spirit is representing you, basically praying for you.

Then Paul offers us this amazing assurance in verses 28-30.

²⁸ And we know that in all things (that is in all our present sufferings and weaknesses) God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. ²⁹ For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters. ³⁰ And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified.

What This Verse Isn’t Saying

Pay attention to what this verse is saying and what it isn't saying. First, it doesn't say that everything that happens in our lives is good. Paul isn’t trying to whitewash the awful things that happen in life. He isn’t minimizing our troubles by trying to pass them off as something else.

There is evil in this world. Bad things happen, and bad things happen to good people, even faithful people who love God. This verse doesn't promise that only good things will happen to you. It assures us that God is able to work out “all things” be they good things, bad things, in-between things, He can work them out in such way that it ultimately results for your good.

It also doesn't say that everything that happens is God's will. I've sometimes heard people say things like everything that happens is according to God’s plan. There is nothing that happens that goes against God's sovereign will. That's simply not true. Every time we sin, that goes against God will. He didn’t want you to do that. That wasn’t his will.

1 Timothy 2:4 says that God *“wants all people to be saved and to come to knowledge of the truth.”* 2 Peter 3:9 says that He doesn’t want *“anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.”* And yet we know from what Jesus says in the Sermon on the Mount that *“small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it.”* God doesn’t get everything He wants, because he created people with a free will, which means we can choose to go against His will.

When someone does something hurtful and hateful to you, that isn’t what God wanted either. It wasn’t God’s will that that happen to you. That’s not the kind of God He is. Sin is never what

God wants.

What This Verse Is Saying

BUT, this is where Romans 8:28 comes in, and this is what this verse is saying –God CAN and DOES use those things for his own purpose. What other people intend in a mean way, what Satan intends in an evil way, God has the power to use it instead for good. Like someone trained in the martial arts who is able to use their opponents force against them. God can redirect their words and actions so that they accomplish his purpose rather than their purpose.

The most beautiful picture of this in the Bible comes from the story of Joseph in the book of Genesis. Just a brief overview for those of us who aren't familiar with this story. Joseph was the youngest of 12 brothers. These are the brothers that eventually become the 12 tribes of Israel. His older brothers were jealous of him. They resented him because he was daddy's favorite, and deep down they were jealous of him because God gave him visions about the future and gave him the ability to interpret and understand those visions. They especially didn't like what some of these visions said about them. But instead of being angry at God, they were angry at their little brother.

So they sold him into slavery and told their father he was killed by a wild animal. Joseph was taken down to Egypt where he was falsely accused of a crime he didn't commit. He was thrown into prison, where he was forgotten by those he helped until one day his God-given ability to interpret dreams and visions was able to help none other than Pharaoh, the ruler of all Egypt.

Because of his help, Pharaoh placed Joseph in a trusted position where he was able to save Egypt from a catastrophic famine. From that moment on he rose in power and influence in Egypt until he was second only to Pharaoh.

One day, his brothers come to Egypt seeking food in the midst of the famine, and Joseph is reunited with his brothers. But now Joseph is older and he's dressed in all his Egyptian regalia, and they don't recognize him. It is the perfect opportunity for revenge or reconciliation. Joseph chooses to forgive. Here's what he tells his brothers in Genesis 50:20 *"You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives."* You did a bad thing. You meant it for evil, but God used it for good.

Romans 8:28 assures us that God's plan is bigger than anything that happens. God's will is big enough to accommodate even the bad things we do. We can disobey him. We can deny his will for our life, but we cannot derail his overall plan. We can go against his purpose for our lives, but we cannot undo his grand purpose for eternity, for all of creation, for his people, for his church. As Jesus assured Peter, *"I will build My church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it."* The powers of sin and death cannot undo God's plan. Neither can you, nor anyone else. God will accomplish his ultimate goal.

The apostle Paul sees God as the master weaver who can knit all the different threads of our lives to create a beautiful masterpiece. The bad things that happen to us cannot undo his purpose in our lives. God can weave even the frayed and tattered threads, the torn threads, and the wrongly colored threads into his masterpiece. He's that good of an artist.

God's Definition of Good

If this verse isn't promising our definition of good here and now, what is the good God is working toward? The first hint comes in the second half of verse 28 where Paul gives another description of those who love God, they are also those "*who have been called according to his purpose.*" If you love God, you have been called. You've been beckoned. You've been summoned. We have been called according to his purpose.

This purpose is what is pointing us to God's ultimate good for us. What is his good? What is his purpose? That you become like Jesus. Listen to verse 29, "*he...predestined that you be conformed to the image of his son.*" That means you become like Jesus. If we tie all of this together, it means that God can use everything that happens in your life to make you more like Jesus.

Being More Like Jesus Now

Being conformed to the image of Jesus means two things: 1. First, it means that we look more like Jesus now, that we take on his character and holiness now. That we love like Jesus. That we forgive like Jesus. That we serve like Jesus. Every time we say what Jesus would say, every time we do what Jesus would do, every time we make the choice Jesus would make, we look a little more like Jesus.

This is the good that God is working towards through everything that happens in your life. If you will let Him, God can use each and every thing to make you look a little more like Jesus. Knowing this really should shape how we perceive and respond to our life circumstances.

This doesn't mean we go through life with a sense of resignation. This is what God predestined to happen, so I can't change it. Just go through life singing Que Sera Sera, Whatever will be, will be.

Think of it this way— everything that happens in life is happening on two levels. There is the earthly level. This is the immediate, the here and now. Then there is the eternal level. This is the spiritual. This is how God is working behind the scenes to use the things happening on this level to accomplish what the primary actors on this first level never intended. Because each level has it's own set of intentions. People on this first level may act in selfishness or kindness, love or greed, sympathy or malice. But on this higher level, God is always acting for your ultimate good.

On this earthly level you are working hard to score that job interview that so far has eluded you. The owner instead gave the job to a lesser qualified old college buddy. You are looking for the house that would offer you a much better situation that you are in right now. Someone you thought was a friend sent a text that was filled with all sorts of hurtful and untrue accusations, and you have no idea why. Your car suddenly died and now you are in a real bind.

But on this higher level, God is trying to teach you patience, waiting for a better break. He's giving you an opportunity to develop better skills. He's wanting you to learn how to make wiser decisions with your money before he entrusts you with more. He's wanting you learn forgiveness. He's wanting you to trust him so he can show you his provision.

So, whenever something happens on this level, spend some time thinking about what God is doing up here. Don't just think about what someone means on this level, think about how God

might intend it on this level.

This really affects how we pray about things. We still pray that God would open this door or that door, that our financial circumstances might change, or for healing or relief from a certain illness, but we also need to pray this, “God, how can you use this to make me more like Jesus? God, what are you trying to show me in this? What is it you want me to learn? How can I become more like Jesus?”

Becoming Like Jesus at the Resurrection

So, being conformed to the image of Jesus means we become more like Jesus now, but it secondly, it also means you will be made like Jesus when he comes back. Paul has hinting at this all the way through Romans 8. This is what we were talking about last week in verses 18 through 27 with God’s glory being revealed in us and the redemption of our bodies. When Jesus comes back, and we are raised, we won’t be raised just as we are now. Our resurrection bodies will be transformed to be like Jesus.

Paul talks about this in 1 Corinthians 15 where he writes at length about our resurrection,

⁴⁹ And just as we have borne the image of the earthly man, so shall we bear the image of the heavenly man.

⁵⁰ I declare to you, brothers and sisters, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable. ⁵¹ Listen, I tell you a mystery: We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed—⁵² in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. ⁵³ For the perishable must clothe itself with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality.

In a sense, Paul wrote this whole chapter to assure the Christian in Rome, and by extension to assure you and me, that one day Jesus will return and we will be glorified.

A Golden Chain of What God Has Done for You

Verses 29 and 30 are a cascading sequence of cause and effect – because of that, then this, and because of that then this. This sequence of verbs, God’s actions, has been called a “golden chain” of what God has done for you. *Those God foreknew, he predestined. Those he predestined, He called. Those He called. He also justified. Those he justified, He also glorified.*

There’s a heaping ton of theology and gospel crammed into just a few verbs here. These are some of the most written about, studied, debated and discussed verses in all of the New Testament. Entire books have been written merely to contemplate these couple of sentences. There’s no way we’re going to unpack all of this in 5 minutes this morning, but that doesn’t mean we shouldn’t be moved to worship and wonder.

But let me run through this sequence real quick. “*Those God foreknew*” –The word used here simply means to know before. God is not bound by time in the same manner we are. For him the future is not an impenetrable guess. It is been said that God sees all of time in an ever-present now. He is able to look through the corridors of time and know us, know our hearts, know our choices, and know our faith. This is one of the things that enables him to work all

things together for our good, because he's playing the long game. He sees how every interconnected event works out in the end.

So what is it that God knew before? More specifically, who did he know before? Well it's who he mentioned in verse 28, *"those who love him."* God foreknew those that would love him. He knew that we would believe and have faith. He knew that we would respond to the good news and repent of our sins. He knew that we would love Jesus. And because he knew that, he went ahead and *"predestined"* them.

Predestined means to predetermine. What did God predetermine that they would be *"conformed to the image of his Son."* Those that love God, he wants to become like Jesus.

"Those he predestined, he also called" – He reaches out to you. He reaches out for you. This is the pull you feel in your heart, the voice you hear in your mind. It is God drawing you in with His love and His truth.

"Those he called, he also justified" – justification is the forgiveness of sins. This is what Jesus did for you on the cross taking away your guilt and shame. He made it *"just if I'd"* never sinned at all. Clean. Forgiven.

"Those he justified, he also glorified" – The end result of this golden chain of God's love is your glorification. We talked about this last week. Our glorification is when we receive our resurrection bodies to spend eternity with Him in heaven. It's that moment where we are fully and finally like Jesus. The interesting thing here, though is that our glorification hasn't happened yet. That doesn't happen until Jesus comes back

But Paul speaks of our glorification here in the past tense. *"Those he justified; he also glorified."* It hasn't happened yet, but Paul speaks as though it is a done deal. That is assurance. Paul wants us to know that our future glorification in Jesus is money in the bank. We can count on it.

That's the assurance we have. No matter what life throws at you God can and will use it to bring about this ultimate end for your life – eternity with him in a glorified, resurrection body like Jesus.

If I could wrap this whole sequence God's actions up with a single word, it would be the word *chosen*. We were chosen. And because God chose us, our eternity is assured.

Think back to when you were a kid and you were with some friends on the school yard or the playground or your backyard, and you decided to play a pickup game of baseball or basketball. I grew up mostly in Indiana where basketball is like a second religion. Even in the middle of winter we'd sweep the snow off the driveway. One kid would call. Captain. A second would immediately answer with *"captain."* Now you had two team captains, and they took turns picking teams.

I pick Johnson. Lester, you're over here. Jones. We'll take Pete. Jennifer's on our team.

When it came time to choose teams, where were you usually chosen in the lineup? We're you always a captain doing the choosing. Were you the star athlete, usually the first one chosen? Good enough to be picked in the middle, contribute to the team and not be embarrassed.

Maybe you were clumsy, uncoordinated, small, slow. Maybe you were one of the last three kids

just praying to not be the last one chosen. That was me for a couple of years in Junior High. I was scrawny. I was scrappy enough when it came to athletics, but for some reason I'd gotten grouped in with the unpopular kids. What a blow it is to the ego to be the last kid standing in the middle and to hear the unfortunate team captain say, "I guess you're with us, Raymond. You got right field." Whoop, whoop.

It was a blessing when we moved to Minnesota. I had put some meat on my bones by then, and the kids were willing to take a chance on the new kid. He might prove to be the secret weapon. As long as we weren't playing ice hockey, I usually held my own, and my days of being picked last were over. But I have never forgotten what that felt like.

I remember secretly hoping, praying, to just now screw up. Don't drop the ball. Don't strike out. Don't make a bad throw. Don't shoot an air ball.

Maybe you know that experience. Maybe you don't, but I'm guessing you can imagine it. What Paul is telling everyone that loves God here is that God wants you on his team. He's chosen you. He's picked you.

But it's not because you're the most athletic, the most popular. It's not because we're playing in your yard, or it's your ball and bat we're using. It's not because of your education, your knowledge, your job. It's not because of your position, or any of your abilities. All that matters is that you love him.

Do you love him?