

God Knows What's Good for Us

Romans 8:26-30

Series: Romans 2022: Righteousness from God – Yay!

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Worship: Working for Our Good

Key Sentence: In all things God is working his will for our good.

Outline:

I. Praying for our good (Romans 8:26-27)

II. Working for our good (Romans 8:28)

III. Achieving our good (Romans 8:29-30)

Romans 8:26–30 Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words. ²⁷And he who searches hearts knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.

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

²⁹For 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. ³⁰And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified.

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Romans 8:26-30

Have you ever compared the front and back of a tapestry? The front is art. In the hands of a skilled weaver it displays incredible artistry and fine detail. The back of a tapestry is often a mess. But what is clear on the front is hidden on the back. Where the front is smooth, the back is covered in knots and loose ends and cross-connects that baffle the eye. This illustrates Romans 8:28, the promise that God is weaving things together for good. Joni Eareckson Tada says “We will stand amazed to see the topside of the tapestry and how God beautifully embroidered each circumstance into a pattern for our good and His glory.” Tim Challies finds the first use of the image in Corrie Ten Boom’s poem “The Master Weaver’s Plan.” “My life is but a weaving between my God and me. I cannot choose the colors He weaveth steadily. Oft’ times He weaveth sorrow; and I in foolish pride forget He sees the upper and I the underside. The dark threads are as needful in the weaver’s skillful hand as the threads of gold and silver in the pattern He has planned.” We see only the underside of all God is weaving together, while clinging to the promise that someday we will see the upper side and marvel at what he has been doing.

The central verse of today’s text is Romans 8:28, a verse often quoted out of context which we will study in context and find it richer as a result. We’ll see that in all things God is working his will for our good. The Holy Spirit is praying God’s will for our good. God himself is working for our good. Through his fulfilling of his own purposes he is achieving our good. Let’s read the text, Romans 8:26–30 *Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words.* ²⁷*And he who searches hearts knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.* 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.* 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.*

Last week we saw that creation groans over the futility and corruption brought on by the fall of man, but that it waits in eager longing for the final revelation of humanity’s redemption and glory.

We also saw that we groan under the same burdens, plus the burden of our own ongoing sin, but that we too wait eagerly for our full adoption and complete redemption. Paul then says, verse 26 “Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words.” This verse is tied to what went before by the repetition of the word “groaning.” Creation groans. We groan, but the Spirit also groans, groans with us and for us in prayer. R. Kent Hughes calls these verses “three groans and a glory.” We’ll get to the glory in a bit, but these are the three groans: creation groans, we groan, and God the Holy Spirit himself groans with us in our weakness.

The verse is also tied to what went before by the word “likewise,” which means “in the same way.” In the same way that our hope sustains us, verses 23-25, so does the Holy Spirit, verse 26. God the Holy Spirit has graciously chosen to come alongside us to help us in our weakness. We’ve been talking about our weakness since Romans 7. It’s the sinful nature that still calls out our sinful desires. It’s the wretchedness that afflicts us when we pursue those sins. It’s also the flesh that treads the woeful road to physical death. It’s the continued influence of the fallen world, the groaning of creation and our groaning as we see the impact of sin in all its cruelty, abuse, oppression, and violence.

This is our weakness, but the Spirit helps us. We’ve already seen that the mind set on the Spirit is life and peace, and that it is through the Spirit that we can now cry out “Abba, Father.” But another sign of our weakness is that “we do not know what to pray for as we ought.” There are so many circumstances in this world where we don’t even know the right thing to pray for. Should we pray to be free of some trial or burden, or have endurance to stand under it? When someone is stricken with a terrible disease or injury, is it God’s will to miraculously cure the person, or to allow the technologies of medicine to cure them, or that the person suffer under those same technologies, or that they be called home through death. I don’t think many of us have gotten this far in life without some circumstance being so overwhelming, complex and difficult that we can’t put it in words. We simply groan.

But praise God “the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words.” When we groan in weakness and ignorance, we are not alone. The Spirit in His compassion groans too. But unlike us, the Spirit’s groanings are intercession, they are words without words, or more accurately prayers without words. Verse 27 “And he who searches hearts knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.” Who is “he who searches hearts?” It’s God the Father.

God said to Samuel “the LORD sees not as man sees: man looks on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart.” Jeremiah 17:10 says “I the LORD search the heart and test the mind.” But when God searches the heart of a believer he finds not only the person’s prayers, but also the wordless cries of His own Holy Spirit, interceding. And because the Holy Spirit is God, he intercedes for the believer in perfect accord with the will of God. This is an incredibly comforting truth. When we don’t know how to pray the Spirit is still crying out in us, in accordance with the Father’s will.

Stott points out that there are thus three persons involved in our praying. First, we ourselves pray in our weakness, though we do not know what to pray. Second, the indwelling Spirit intercedes for us and through us, with speechless groans according to God's will. Third, God the Father, who both searches our hearts and knows the Spirit's mind, hears and answers accordingly. John Murray adds that the children of God have two divine intercessors. Isaiah and Hebrews both teach that Jesus makes intercession for the saints before the throne of God. Paul will teach that here, next week. But the Spirit intercedes too. So Murray says “Christ is their intercessor in the court of heaven, while The Holy Spirit is their intercessor in the theater of their own hearts.”

By the way, just to be clear, these Holy Spirit groans are not the gift of tongues, not the prayer language that some teach who embrace tongues. The simple reason for this is that these groans are without words, whereas a prayer language is words, though you don’t understand them. But of equal weight is Paul’s clear teaching in 1st Corinthians 12:30 that only some speak in tongues, not all. The “groans” here are intercession that comes to the aid of all believers. All have the Spirit and he cries out according to God’s will on our behalf.

So, the Spirit is praying on our behalf for our good. God hears those prayers and answers. This brings us to Paul’s central point in this section, that God is at work for our good. Verse 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.” This verse begins with the words “we know,” even though we don’t know what to pray. We navigate the uncertainties and unknowns of our lives as Christians by building on the things that we do know. What do we know from this verse? We know who it’s for. The first and last phrases in the English Standard Version, bookends to the main thought, tell us. Who is this promise for? First, those who love God. Paul isn’t offering a general, superficial optimism that everything tends to everybody's good in the end. No, if God’s good objective is our eternal salvation, then its beneficiaries are his people, those who love him.

This is an unusual phrase for Paul. His normal talks of God's love for us. "God demonstrates his love for us in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us." Yet the concept of loving God would be familiar to Paul's readers. The most basic command of the law to love the LORD your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength. This was also the first and greatest commandment according to Jesus. It is an apt shorthand description for those who have become his, through grace alone by faith alone. We are those who love God.

The parallel phrase at the end of the verse, however, describes the same truth from God's point of view. God's good is for those who are called according to his purpose. From God's point of view this call is not only an invitation but a summons to become recipients of God grace. Moo emphasizes this in his paraphrase: "we know that all things are working for good for those of us who love God; and we know this is so because we who love God are also those who have been summoned by God to enter into relationship with him, a summons that is in accordance with God's purpose to mold us into the image of Christ and to glorify us." This calling takes place in accordance with and based on God's purpose. God's summons of believers was issued with a particular purpose, or plan, in mind, that believers should become like Christ and share in his glory. And it is because this is God's good plan we can be certain that all things will work toward the realization of this plan in our lives.

Now that we know who the promise is for, believers, we can also be sure of the promise itself: "all things work together for good." It is possible to translate this "God works all things together for good." The New International Version does that. It assumes that God, though not named, is the subject of the verb, rather than "all things." I myself wouldn't translate it that way, but I agree that there is no one else who could be doing this work. God does work all things. The second translation choice is to add the word "together." "All things work together for good." The Greek literally says "all things work for good" and I think that's fine, even if the idea of fitting all things together is implied.

But what does Paul mean by "all things?" In context, Paul must mean all these sufferings and all these groanings work together to accomplish God's purpose. He is using these hard things to mold us into the likeness of Christ. But it would be wrong to limit "all things" to sufferings and groanings, because God also uses good things to draw us to delight in him. He uses all the blessings as well as all the hardships to teach us how great he is and how much we can trust him. This is the good that God is working toward He's obviously not just offering us a good night's sleep or a good airplane flight or a good meal. He's got a larger purpose, especially that of conforming us to the image of his Son.

Everything God orchestrates in our lives has the goal of our good and his glory, the goal of us being his people and he being our God and him dwelling with us. God alone can achieve this. Because of God all things work together for good.

I can't resist the temptation to illustrate this with a story. There was once an African tribal chieftain who had a faithful servant with a positive attitude about everything. His response to every event was "This is good." One day the chief and his servant were out on a hunting expedition. The servant had apparently done something wrong in preparing one of the guns, for when the chief fired it blew his thumb off. Examining the situation, the servant said, as usual, "This is good!" Angrily the chief replied, "No, this is not good!" and proceeded to lock his friend up in the prison hut. Three years later, the chief was hunting again, unaware that he was in an area with a cannibal tribe. They captured him and took him to their village, where they bound him to a stake, stacked wood and prepared to set fire. Then they noticed the chief was missing a thumb. Being superstitious, they never ate anyone who was less than whole. So they freed him. As he went home, he was reminded of the event that had taken his thumb and felt remorse for his treatment of his servant. He went immediately to the prison. "You were right," he said, "it was good that my thumb was blown off." And he proceeded to tell the servant all that had just happened. "I am very sorry for locking you up for so long. It was bad for me to do this." "No," his servant replied, "This is good!" "What do you mean, 'This is good'? How could it be good that I sent you to jail for three years?" "Because if I had not been in jail, I would have been with you. And I am whole." Silly story.

But the point is that what appears to be bad from our perspective may not always turn out bad. God is weaving our story into his larger story and only when the tapestry is turned around will we see how good and glorious that story is. God will achieve his good purposes. That's our last point. God is achieving our good and he has told us what that is and the steps he has taken to achieve it. Verse 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." Let me say right off that in the long debate between free will and predestination, I gladly take both sides. I believe the Bible teaches that God is sovereign and chooses those who will be saved. I also believe people are responsible and must choose to turn from sin to God in faith to be saved. Furthermore, I think that in God's infinite sophistication, both things happen with full integrity, they are compatible. Neither is a fake. This verse talks about the process from the viewpoint of God's sovereign acts, and I'm good with that. Yet I could show you verses even in Romans that talk about it from the point of view of your choice to trust. And I'm good with that too.

What we're seeing this morning focuses on the good God sovereignly works for his children. Paul traces that through five stages from its beginning in the knowledge of God to its consummation in the coming glory, through foreknowledge, predestination, calling, justification and glorification.

He starts with foreknowledge. This basically means to know in advance. Before time began, God knew who would turn to him in trust. But this can't be the whole story because it denies the element of divine sovereignty. If God saves people only because he knows they are going to believe, then their salvation is from themselves, their merit, instead of from him and his mercy. That's not what this is saying. Knowledge, in Scripture, isn't just about intellectual knowing. It's about relationship. Hosea 13:4 says "But I am the LORD your God from the land of Egypt; you know no God but me, and besides me there is no savior. It was I who knew you in the wilderness, in the land of drought." To know the people of Israel meant to act for them, to care for them in their needs. It's not just to foreknow it's to forelove, as Moses teaches in Deuteronomy. "It was not because you were more in number than any other people that the LORD set his love on you and chose you, for you were the fewest of all peoples, ⁸but it is because the LORD loves you." So from eternity past God set his love on people and knew, for example that Abraham would believe him and it would be credited to him as righteousness, knew that Joseph would see in his brothers' evil what God was working for good, knew that David in his sin would turn in repentance and glorify God's steadfast love. God sovereignly set his love on you and knew that you would respond in faith.

Secondly, those he foreknew and foreloved he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. The word predestined simply means to decide upon beforehand. Perhaps the clearest use is in Acts 4. Peter says "Indeed Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel in this city to conspire against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed. ²⁸They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen." Notice the balance. They conspired to put him to death, but God had decided beforehand, predestined that it would happen. Part of the point in both these first two words is that God's decision precedes ours. This doesn't invalidate our decision, but it means we must give God the glory and the precedence in our salvation. It is all of God and not of me. As J. I. Packer taught, we don't say "I saved myself," we say "God saved me," and we don't pray "God, please let so-and-so save himself," we pray "God save him." We recognize the precedence of God's sovereignty without diminishing human responsibility.

The end of verse 29 breaks into the chain of reasoning to offer us assurance of the good God is working through this process of salvation. The first good is that we should be conformed to the image of his Son. We mentioned this earlier. Here Paul states it clearly. God's eternal purpose for his people is that we should become like Jesus. The transformation process begins now in our character and conduct, through the work of the Holy Spirit. It will be brought to completion only when Christ comes and we see him, and our bodies become glorious, like his, transformed. The second purpose of God's predestination is that, through our conformity to the image of Christ, he might be the firstborn among many brothers. We are destined to be part of his family, beloved, intimate, adopted children, while giving him the glory of the firstborn.

In verse 30 Paul adds the last three links to the chain. “And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified.” He called us. The call of God comes through the gospel. When the gospel is spoken with the Spirit’s power and people respond to it with the obedience of faith, we know God has chosen them. This is where Paul’s golden chain of salvation connects back to verse 28. God’s working of all things for the good is for those who are called according to his purpose, his purpose to conform us to the image of his Son, his purpose to make us part of his family, his purpose to justify and glorify us.

Fourth step: “those whom he called he also justified.” Justification by faith was the central topic of the first four chapters of Romans. It is more than forgiveness, acquittal or even acceptance; it is a declaration that sinners are now righteous in God's sight. By his sovereign act of sacrifice on the cross Christ became sin for us in order that we might become the righteousness of God. This step is entirely the work of God, the work of grace and in no way the work of our works, our merit or our law-keeping. Every step in this golden chain of salvation is from God. Every step is the good that he is working for us.

Fifth, and finally, “those whom he justified he also glorified.” Paul has used “glory” throughout Romans. My definition of glory is the radiance of the perfection of all of God’s character qualities. Sinners, we were told in Romans 3:23 fall short of this perfection, this glory. But, Romans 5:2, we rejoice in the hope of being fully and finally restored to the experience of God’s glory. Paul also told us last week that if we share Christ's sufferings we will share his glory and that the creation itself will one day be brought into the freedom of the glory of God's children. Now he uses the verb: those he justified, he also glorified. Our destiny is to be given new bodies in a new world, both of which will be transfigured to be filled with the glory of God. Not ours, His.

Notice that this final outcome of sharing in God's glory is so certain that although it is still future, Paul puts it into the same completed past tense as all the other steps. Paul sees the glory as just as certain of completion as the other stages.

Here then is Paul's series of five undeniable affirmations. God is pictured as moving irresistibly from stage to stage; from an eternal foreknowledge and predestination, through a historical call and justification, to a final glorification of his people in a future eternity.

We're a little short of time, but I want to close with a true story of God weaving things together for good. A missionary couple named David and Svea Flood traveled from Sweden to the heart of Africa to take the gospel to a remote area. Unfortunately, when they arrived their only contact with anyone from the village was with a young boy who the chief allowed to come sell them food. Svea ended up leading that young boy to faith in Jesus but that was their only progress. Soon Svea contracted malaria while pregnant. She died several days after giving birth. David dug a crude grave and buried his 27 year old wife. "I'm going back to Sweden. I've lost my wife. I obviously can't take care of this baby. God has ruined my life." He gave his baby daughter Aggie to a missionary couple from the US who returned there to raise her.

Years later Aggie found a Swedish magazine in the mail. She was flipping through it when a photograph stopped her cold. It was a picture of a crude grave with a white cross. On the cross was the name Svea Flood. She found someone who could read the Swedish magazine and learned that the one boy who had been led to Christ grew up in faith and finally persuaded the chief to let him build a school in the village. Gradually he won all his students to Christ. The children led their parents to Christ. Even the chief became a Christian.

Later Aggie traveled to Sweden to find her father. She found him in a tiny apartment, 73 years old and surrounded by liquor bottles. As soon as he found out who she was, the old man began to cry and apologized profusely. She smiled and said "It's all right papa God took care of me." Instantly he stiffened and his tears stopped. "God forgot all of us," he said, turning his face to the wall. "Our lives have been like this because of Him." Then she told him the story of the boy who had been saved. "The one seed you planted just kept growing and growing. Today more than 600 African people are serving the Lord because of your work. You didn't go to Africa in vain. Mama didn't die in vain. Papa, Jesus loves you. He has never abandoned you." Her father was stunned and overwhelmed. He turned back to the God he had resented for so many decades. A moment of God's grace defeated decades of resentment.

A few years later Svea met the African boy who won the village for Christ. He was at that time superintendent of the national church, with over 110,000 believers. The two embraced as he told her through sobs “Your mother is the most famous person in our history.” He invited her to his village where she arrived to a huge crowd cheering and praising God. She knelt and wept tears of joy at her mother’s grave and gave thanks for God’s work.

In all things God is working his will for our good.