

“The Book of Romans: Our Blessed Hope”

Today we continue our series in the book of Romans. If you have your Bibles, go ahead and open to chapter eight. It's one of the most powerful chapters in the entire Bible. It contains some of the most important and life-changing promises.

I shared with our adult Middle Hour class (last weekend) that this chapter is (quite possibly) my favorite chapter in all of scripture. Apart from the stories of Jesus' life, and (those chapters) that deal with his death and resurrection and the difference those events make for us, this chapter is right at the top. It's theologically (loaded); it contains some of the most profound truths about God we have. It's also one of the most practical chapters in terms of its life-application. If you understand what this chapter is all about, it'll change the way you live.

Now, we're not going to have time to go through the whole thing. (It would take us a number of weeks.) Instead, what I want to do is frame what the chapter is all about (the beginning and the end) and then, zero-in, (in the middle), on one of the most important promises you'll ever find. It's a promise (for the follower of Jesus) that puts all of life, (no matter what it is), in its proper perspective.

Before looking at the promise, let's frame the chapter. Look at what Paul says, at the beginning of chapter eight. After leading us through everything he's already said (in the first seven chapters), all that happened when Jesus took our sin to the cross, (he says), “Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.” There is no condemnation for those who are in Christ.

How come? (Verse 2), “because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death.” (We've been set free, Paul says. God's law is no longer a burden.) “For what the law was powerless to do” (he says), (the commandments, the requirements, the guidelines God has given) “in that it was weakened by the sinful nature, God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful man to be a sin offering. And so he condemned sin in sinful man (in us), in order that the righteous requirements of the law might be fully met in us, who do not live according to the sinful nature but according to the Spirit.”

All of that to say that Paul opens (chapter eight) by simply restating what he's already laid out. In the first four verses, he gives us a summary of the gospel, of what God has done for us in his Son, and how (in Jesus) we've been set free from the law (and made right) with God. That's how he starts. There's no condemnation for those who are in Christ.

Now look at the end of the chapter. (Here's how he closes it.) Based upon what God has already accomplished (in Jesus), based upon what is already ours in Christ, Paul says (verse 31), “What, then, shall we say in response to this? If God is for us (and he is), who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all – how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?”

In other words, (and here he's arguing from the greater to the lesser), if God was willing to this (and he was), doesn't it (naturally follow) that he'd be willing to do that? (Of course it does.) He gave his Son for you. He allowed Jesus to die. He's not going to quit on you now.

Now, jump to verse 37, “No, in all these things (no matter what happens), he says, we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

Nothing will separate you from the love of God. There is no condemnation for those who are in Christ. Because of Jesus, our lives are secure. Because of Christ (and his cross), your life is secure. Nothing can separate you from God. It's not going to happen. In (and because of) Jesus, you belong to him. That's the framework.

And so, what's the promise (in the middle) of this chapter? What does God want us to hear (and to know) in what's been framed? Before reading it (taking it on), I came across a study (not long ago) of two professors in Berkley who did some research and found (of all things) that “spoilers”, those who spoil a story (or a movie) by telling you how it ends, don't actually spoil the story by telling you the ending.

What they did was, they ran three experiments in which they let a certain percentage (of those tested) know how the story was going to end (before reading it), while the rest of those (being tested) didn't know. What they found was that those who knew the ending (before they read the story) actually enjoyed the story more than those who didn't. For those who knew how it ended, while they were reading, they enjoyed what they were reading more than if they didn't know.

One of the conclusions they drew (from their research) was that for those who knew the ending (before they got there), they enjoyed the story more because they were able to process what they were reading, (even when it wasn't a good chapter in the story), because they knew how it would eventually end.

Now, when I first heard that, I pushed back on it. I don't like spoilers. (I don't.) I don't like it when someone tells me the ending to a movie before I've ever seen it. It takes away all of the suspense. I don't like it (on Sunday morning) when someone tells me (how my football team did) while I was in church, when I was planning to go home (later on) and watch the game. (There's your warning.)

At the same time, when I know my team has already won (even before watching it), then I can watch the game (and enjoy it) even when they fall way behind and it seems like there's no chance. I can still enjoy watching, because I know how it's all going to end.

And so, when it comes to Romans (chapter eight) and Paul talks about the struggles we face in life, it's the same thing. Because we know how the story ends, because we can trust the Author who is behind the story, and who's actively involved in writing it, we can go through the story (and process it) differently than if we did not. Instead of fear, we can have faith that things are leading to a good ending.

Now, for some of you (here today), this is very timely, because you're going through a chapter in your life you didn't choose. You're facing things in your life you didn't want, that were uninvited, and you never saw coming.

Maybe you're in a chapter titled divorce...or it's titled abuse...or it's titled terminal. Maybe it's a chapter titled fired...or it's titled bankrupt...or it's titled forgotten or broken or unemployed.

Look at the promise. Romans, chapter eight, beginning in verse 28, (Paul says) "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." In all things God works for the good for those who (love him) and are called in Christ.

Now, on the surface, this sounds like a beautiful promise. In all things God works for good. In all things God works for what's best. It's a beautiful promise, in all things God is working for good...especially if the lens (through which you're looking) is a time in your life when things are coming together and going well, when all of your life is falling into place as you hoped. It's a beautiful promise...when it's all happening as you had planned. But what if it's not? What if your life seems to contradict what this promise says?

It's a beautiful promise...but if it's your marriage that's falling apart, if it's your home that is broken, if it's your health that's failing, your child that is sick (and struggling), if it's your job that's been eliminated, then this promise suddenly isn't quite so comforting.

It could even seem inconsistent. In fact, it could even seem offensive, because your life seems to so strongly contradict the promise we're reading. How can God say that...that all things work together for good? (How can he say that?) And (all of us) could come up with examples that seem to fly in the face of this promise in Romans chapter eight.

Certainly the church in Rome (to whom these words were first written) could have told their own stories. This is a church where they were experiencing some pretty intense persecution. Because of their faith, they could have easily lost their jobs. Because of their faith, they could have (quite possibly) lost their lives. They were among those who "loved God and were called according to his purpose", just like Paul had said, but their lives were not all good. They were suffering for their faith. Their lives were on the line for their faith. And Paul knew it, but he still said it. (How could he say it?)

I want you to notice something (in these verses), a word Paul uses that we translate "we know". That word (translated) "we know" is used 13 times in the book of Romans. Thirteen times, (in the book of Romans) Paul says things about God (and about our faith) that we know.

He uses that same word ("we know") two times in chapter eight. One place is back in verse 22, where he says "we know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time." We know that things in this life are not what God intended them to be. In other words, Paul says "we know" that life is hard. We know that life can be tough. (We know it.)

But then, in verse 28, he says, “we know that in all things God works for good...” We know that in all things God works for good. Two times, Paul uses that same word. We know that life is hard, without question, we know it. We also know that God is good; there’s no doubt. (He is.) We know. How can this happen? How do you put those two things together?

Now, we need to be careful (when it comes to these verses) that we don’t try to make them say something they don’t. They don’t say that if you love God and are called according to his purpose that everything in your life will be good. (They don’t say that.)

Many people believe that. Many churches (without even realizing it) teach that...that if you love God and are called according to his purpose, if you go to church, and you put money in the plate, and you raise your kids in the faith, and do all of the right things, that it’s all going to be good and you’ll avoid all of the pain...but it doesn’t say that. It’s not true. Instead, we’re called to look for God’s good purpose to come out of life’s hard pain.

It’s helpful for me to remember this distinction. There’s a difference between “reason” and “purpose.” There’s a difference between reason and purpose.

Many people try to look for a reason. They say things like (trying to be helpful) that God has his reasons. (We don’t understand it, but God has his reasons...just trust.) People say that.

I don’t believe that. Yes, God has his reasons, (of course he does, for everything), but the reason for everything that happens in life isn’t because it’s what God wants. (It’s not.) The reason bad things happen (in life) is sin. In a fallen world (like ours), it’s only a matter of time. There’s an enemy, a deceiver, whose (sole purpose) is to steal and kill and destroy. Bad things happen, and the reason is not God.

God may not have a reason, but he has a purpose. (These are different things.) You see, reason looks for a “because.” (This happened because of this.) But purpose (in contrast) gives us a “for.” (God is using it “for” this.) Reason wants an explanation to make sense of whatever it is that’s happening. Purpose gives us a hope that (whatever happens) God is still at work.

Don’t get trapped into thinking that God has a reason for everything. He doesn’t. (There’s no hope in that.) But he does use everything for his good purposes, (for those who love him and are called), and there’s a difference.

Look at verse 29: “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.”

Now, that’s a verse that’s loaded. (We could spend all day.) But it’s not that hard to follow. Look at what Paul says. He says, “For those God foreknew...”

This idea of God’s foreknowledge has to do with his omniscience, the fact that he knows everything, even before it happens. For us, until it happens, we don’t know. But for God, he sees it all differently.

He knows what has happened. He knows what is happening. And he knows what will happen, even before it does. He has foreknowledge that we don’t. He lives outside of time and space, and we’re limited by both. Because he’s not, God is able to see and know all of what is going to happen before it happens.

And so what does that mean for us? It means that you are never in a chapter (in your life) that is a surprise to God. You might have been surprised. You never saw it coming, but God did. He knew it was going to happen, before it even happened. There’s nothing in your life that comes as a surprise to God.

And so, (Paul says), “For those God foreknew...he also predestined.” In other words, God’s predestination is based upon God’s foreknowledge. Because God knows everything (in advance), he is able to predestine or preordained everything that happens to us.

It doesn’t say he causes everything, (that’s different), but he predestines everything that happens so that what? So that everything that happens to us (be it good or bad) will help us “be conformed to the likeness of his Son...to make us more like Jesus Christ.”

In a sense, God’s foreknowledge means that whatever happens (in the future) is certain, but it’s not his foreknowledge that causes it to happen, but his foreknowledge of whatever is going to happen (and will happen) allows him to use whatever happens for his good purpose.

This is the highest level of God’s sovereignty. It’s not that he causes everything, but that he causes everything to work together. This is a whole-nother level of sovereignty. God doesn’t cause everything, but he takes everything and uses it for his work and his purpose.

Watch how it unfolds. “Those he foreknew, he also predestined; those he predestined, he also called...” This is the idea that God is behind all of it. We didn’t call God. He called us. You didn’t choose him. While you were still a sinner, he chose you. We can’t take any credit.

“Those he foreknew, he also predestined; those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified...” (This goes right back to the gospel.) We are right with God, only because of Jesus. We are justified (or made right) before him, only because of Christ. It was his death and his blood and his resurrection that made it happen, not us.

“Those he foreknew, he also predestined; those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified.”

(Paul says), this is the final chapter. This is where it is all leading. It’s the final chapter, and it’s called “glorified...and it never ends.”

And so, whatever chapter you’re now in, this is where it is all heading. This is where it will all end. It’ll all end with a chapter called “glorified”, and that chapter will never end. It’s where it’s all headed.

And so (Paul says), we have this confidence, we have this faith instead of fear...because we know that (even when) life is hard, God is good. Because God foreknew what was going to happen, he predestined (or preordained) that, even when we don’t see it, he is (and he will) be working it all out for his good purpose.

Paul makes no promises of a happily-ever-after story in this life. He gives no false-hope that (if you’re a follower of Jesus) there will be no pain. He doesn’t say that. What he does (instead) is to point us to what God has already accomplished for us in his Son, and tells us that (whatever chapter) you’re now in is leading to a final chapter called “glorified”, because God (in Christ), has predestined and called and justified you for his glory and your good.

One day (in heaven) we’ll finally be able to see how God was doing this. Right now, (and I get it), it doesn’t make sense to you. And (believe me), I don’t want to be that preacher who makes it sound like the things we face in this life are not tough, because they are. Most times, they’re not even fair.

Instead, I’d point you to the Author and tell you to trust in what he is doing. He knows your life. He knows the story that’s being written. And he loves you eternally, all the way to the cross. Amen.