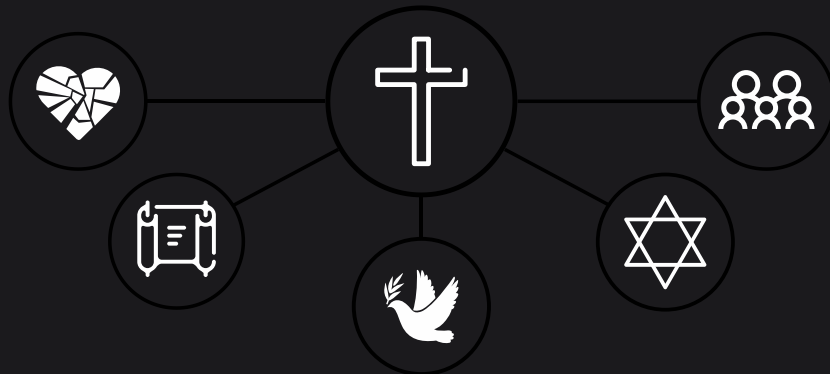




# ROMANS AND THE FUTURE GOSPEL

ROMANS 1-7



**Title:** Romans and the Future Gospel

**Text:** Romans 8:28-30

**Date:** April 2, 2023

**Main Idea:** God works all things together for good for those who love Him.

## Personal Study Guide

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READ ROMANS 8:28-30

## Highlight – What stands out?

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Let's Review:

1. Paul begins verse 28 with “And” meaning, he is connecting this thought to a previous idea. What is building on in Romans 8:21-27 that connects verse 28 to the previous verses?

Let's look at the verses for today:

2. What subset of people does Paul describe in verse 28? (There are two descriptive phrases).
3. What theological terms does Paul list in verses 29-30? Are any of them new or confusing to you?
4. What word connects Paul's statements in verses 29-30?

## Explain – What does this mean?

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1. In verse 28, Paul states that God works all things for the good for *those who love him*. Since the mark of true believers is love for God, what does it mean to love God? **See Deut. 6:5.**
2. He goes on to say “for those who are called according to his purpose.” What does this mean? **(Look up Ephesians 1:17-18, 1 Thessalonians 2:12, 2 Thessalonians 2:13-14).**

3. In the immediate context of verse 28, what circumstances does God work together with the Spirit to promote the good of believers? **(See Romans 8:18 and 8:26).**
  
4. In verse 29, Paul states that those whom God *foreknew he also predestined*. What does it mean to be foreknown by God? **(See Deuteronomy 7:6-8; 1 Peter 1:1-2, 1:20).**
  
5. What does it mean to be predestined? What is the purpose of God's predestined plan in verse 29? **(See John 15:16-17; Ephesians 1:3-14; Colossians 1:15-21).**
  
6. **Read Romans 5:1-11.** What similarities do you notice? How does this passage help explain or inform what is happening in Romans 8:28-30?

## **Apply – How does this change me?**

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1. What makes you doubt God's promise to take you to heaven? How can we know that all things work together for those who love God? **(See Romans 8:1).**
  
2. Where do we go to find the strength to endure all things? **(See Hebrews 4:14-16).**

3. How does knowing that you are *among many brothers (and sisters)* encourage you? **(See Romans 12:15).**
  
4. Paul uses a chain of events to show that we have certainty of our future hope. What different things in verses 29-30 show us that certainty? Where are you in that chain of events?
  
5. This will be fleshed out even more in Romans 9, but it is teased here in the use of words like “foreknew”, “predestined”, and “called”. Read Romans 3:19-20 and Romans 4:24. How do these two passages resolve or bring tension to questions regarding human responsibility and divine sovereignty?
  
- 6.

## **Respond – What’s my next step?**

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1. Pray and thank God for all the ways His steadfast love sustains you in the circumstances of life.
  
2. What is holding you back from being conformed to Christ? Think about practical steps that you can take to be more conformed to the image of Christ.

3. The word “called” or “calling” can be confusing sometimes because there are two types of calls. There is the “general call”, where we call all people to place their faith in Christ to be saved. Then there is the “effectual call”, which is what Paul is talking about here in Romans 8:28-30. This is a call that leads to life and transformation. Who can you make the “general call” with this week or in the near future? Pray that this “general call” would lead to an “effectual call.”
4. When you are suffering, how do you imagine God and his response to you? How does Paul’s definition differ than your definition?

## **Commentary: Taken from John Stott’s commentary on Romans 8:28-30**

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**Note to Group Leaders: You also have your F.F. Bruce Commentary on Romans you were given on Team Night. You can use that one, in addition to this one, to help you grasp the text. Reach out to Courtney Reissig if you need one or haven’t received yours.**

**\*\*\*Group Leaders: It might be helpful to use his five convictions and affirmations as a springboard for discussion if you want to go in that direction.**

### **3. The steadfastness of God’s love (28–39)**

In the last twelve verses of Romans 8 the apostle soars to sublime heights unequalled elsewhere in the New Testament. Having described the chief privileges of justified believers—peace with God (5:1–11), union with Christ (5:12–6:23), freedom from the law (7:1–25) and life in the Spirit (8:1–27)—his great Spirit-directed mind now sweeps over the whole plan and purpose of God from a past eternity to an eternity still to come, from the divine foreknowledge and predestination to the divine love from which absolutely nothing will ever be able to separate us.

To be sure, at present we experience sufferings and groans, but we are sustained in the midst of them by the hope of glory. So far it is only a ‘hope’, because it is still future, unseen and unrealized, but it is not on that account uncertain. On the contrary, our Christian hope is solidly grounded on the unwavering love of God. So the burden of Paul’s climax is the eternal security

of God's people, on account of the eternal unchangeability of God's purpose, which is itself due to the eternal steadfastness of God's love.

These tremendous truths the apostle declares three times over, although from three different perspectives. He begins with five unshakeable convictions (28) about God working all things together for the good of his people. He continues with five undeniable affirmations (29–30) regarding the successive stages of God's saving purpose from eternity to eternity. And he concludes with five unanswerable questions (31–39), in which he challenges anybody to contradict the convictions and the affirmations which he has just expressed.

#### *a. Five unshakeable convictions (28)*

Romans 8:28 is surely one of the best-known texts in the Bible. On it believers of every age and place have stayed their minds. It has been likened to a pillow on which to rest our weary heads.

We note that verse 28 begins with the statement *we know*. Verse 22 began likewise. So here are two assertions of Christian knowledge, one about the groaning creation and the other about God's providential care. Yet there are many other things which we do not know. For example, 'we do not know what we ought to pray for' (26). In fact, we are caught in a continuous tension between what we know and what we do not know. It is just as foolish to claim to know what we do not know as it is to confess not to know what we do know. In those areas in which God has not plainly revealed his mind, the right attitude for us to adopt is that of Christian agnosticism. But in verse 28 Paul lists five truths about God's providence which *we know*.

First, we know that *God works*, or is at work, in our lives. The familiar AV rendering that 'all things work together for good' is surely to be rejected, since all things do not automatically work themselves together into a pattern of good. The AV statement would be acceptable only if 'it is the sovereign guidance of God that is presumed as the undergirding and directing force behind all the events of life'. An early copyist evidently felt the need to make this explicit by adding 'God' as the subject of the verb. But the manuscript support for this reading, although 'both ancient and noteworthy',<sup>130</sup> is insufficient to secure its acceptance. The addition is also unnecessary, for the order of words permits the translation, 'we know that for those who love God he is working ...'. He is ceaselessly, energetically and purposefully active on their behalf.

Secondly, God is at work *for the good of his people*. Being himself wholly good, his works are all expressions of his goodness and are calculated to advance his people's good. Moreover, the 'good' which is the goal of all his providential dealings with us is our ultimate well-being, namely our final salvation. Verses 29–30 make this plain.

Thirdly, God works for our good *in all things*. The NIV translation understands *panta* ('all things') not as the object of the verb ('God works everything for

good') but as an accusative of respect ('in everything God works for good'). Either way, 'all things' must include the sufferings of verse 17 and the groanings of verse 23. 'Thus all that is negative in this life is seen to have a positive purpose in the execution of God's eternal plan.' Nothing is beyond the overruling, overriding scope of his providence.

Fourthly, God works in all things for the good of *those who love him*. This is a necessary limitation. Paul is not expressing a general, superficial optimism that everything tends to everybody's good in the end. No, if the 'good' which is God's objective is our completed salvation, then its beneficiaries are his people who are described as those who love him. This is an unusual phrase for Paul, because his references in Romans to love are rather to God's love for us (e.g. 5:5, 8; 8:35, 37, 39). Nevertheless, he does elsewhere allude to our love for God, and this is a common biblical concept, since the first and great commandment is that we love God with all our being.<sup>133</sup>

Fifthly, those who love God are also described as those *who have been called according to his purpose*. For 'their love for him is a sign and token of his prior love for them', which has found expression in his eternal purpose and his historical call. So God has a saving purpose, and is working in accordance with it. Life is not the random mess which it may sometimes appear.

These are the five truths about God which, Paul writes, *we know*. We do not always understand what God is doing, let alone welcome it. Nor are we told that he is at work for our comfort. But we know that in all things he is working towards our supreme good. And one of the reasons we know this is that we are given many examples of it in Scripture. For instance, this was Joseph's conviction about his brothers' cruelty in selling him into Egypt: 'You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good ... the saving of many lives.' Similarly, Jeremiah wrote in God's name a letter to the Jews in Babylonian exile after the catastrophic destruction of Jerusalem: ' "I know the plans I have for you," declares the LORD, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future." ' The same concurrence of human evil and divine plan had its most conspicuous display in the cross, which Peter attributed both to the wickedness of men and to 'God's set purpose and foreknowledge'.<sup>137</sup>

#### *b. Five undeniable affirmations (29–30)*

In these two verses Paul elaborates what he meant in verse 28 by God's 'purpose', according to which he has called us and is working everything together for our good. He traces God's good and saving purpose through five stages from its beginning in his mind to its consummation in the coming glory. These stages he names foreknowledge, predestination, calling, justification and glorification.

First comes a reference to *those God foreknew*. Since the common meaning of 'to foreknow' is to know something beforehand, in advance of its happening, some commentators both ancient and modern have concluded

that God foresees who will believe, and that this foreknowledge is the basis of his predestination. But this cannot be right, for at least two reasons. First, in this sense God foreknows everybody and everything, whereas Paul is referring to a particular group. Secondly, if God predestines people because they are going to believe, then the ground of their salvation is in themselves and their merit, instead of in him and his mercy, whereas Paul's whole emphasis is on God's free initiative of grace.

Other commentators have therefore reminded us that the Hebrew verb 'to know' expresses much more than mere intellectual cognition; it denotes a personal relationship of care and affection. Thus, when God 'knows' people, he watches over them, and when he 'knew' the children of Israel in the desert, what is meant is that he cared for them.<sup>139</sup> Indeed, Israel was the only people out of all the families of the earth whom Yahweh had 'known', that is, loved, chosen and formed a covenant with. The meaning of 'foreknowledge' in the New Testament is similar. 'God did not reject his people [Israel], whom he foreknew', that is, whom he loved and chose (11:2). In the light of this biblical usage John Murray writes: ' "Know" ... is used in a sense practically synonymous with "love" ... "Whom he foreknew" ... is therefore virtually equivalent to "whom he foreloved".' Foreknowledge is 'sovereign, distinguishing love'. This fits in with Moses' great statement: 'The LORD did not set his affection on you and choose you because you were more numerous than other peoples ... But it was because the LORD loved you....' The only source of divine election and predestination is divine love.

Secondly, *those God foreknew, or foreloved, he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers* (29). The verb *predestined* translates *proorizō*, which means to 'decide upon beforehand' (BAGD), as in Acts 4:28 ('They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen'). Clearly, then, a decision is involved in the process of becoming a Christian, but it is God's decision before it can be ours. This is not to deny that we 'decided for Christ', and freely, but to affirm that we did so only because he had first 'decided for us'. This emphasis on God's gracious, sovereign decision or choice is reinforced by the vocabulary with which it is associated. On the one hand, it is attributed to God's 'pleasure', 'will', 'plan' and 'purpose', and on the other it is traced back to 'before the creation of the world'<sup>146</sup> or 'before time began'. C. J. Vaughan sums the issue up in these words:

Everyone who is eventually saved can only ascribe his salvation, from the first step to the last, to God's favour and act. Human merit must be excluded: and this can only be by tracing back the work far beyond the obedience which evidences, or even the faith which appropriates, salvation; even to an act of spontaneous favour on the part of that God who foresees and foreordains from eternity all his works.



Neither Scripture nor experience allows us to weaken this teaching. As for Scripture, not only throughout the Old Testament is Israel acknowledged as 'the one nation on earth that God went out to redeem as a people for himself', to be his special 'treasured possession', but throughout the New Testament it is recognized that human beings are by nature blind, deaf and dead, so that their conversion is impossible unless God gives them sight, hearing and life.

Our own experience confirms this. Dr J. I. Packer, in his fine essay *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God*, points out that in fact all Christian people believe in God's sovereignty in salvation, even if they deny it. 'Two facts show this,' he writes. 'In the first place, you give God thanks for your conversion. Now why do you do that? Because you know in your heart that God was entirely responsible for it. You did not save yourself; he saved you ... There is a second way in which you acknowledge that God is sovereign in salvation. You pray for the conversion of others ... You ask God to work in them everything necessary for their salvation.' So our thanksgivings and our intercessions prove that we believe in divine sovereignty. 'On our feet we may have arguments about it, but on our knees we are all agreed.'

Yet the mysteries remain. And as finite and fallen creatures we have no right to demand explanations from our infinite and perfect Creator. Nevertheless, he has thrown light on our problem in such a way as to contradict the chief objections which are raised and to show that the consequences of predestination are the opposite of what is popularly supposed. I give five examples.

1. Predestination is said to foster arrogance, since (it is alleged) God's elect boast of their favoured status. But on the contrary, predestination excludes boasting. For it fills God's people with astonishment that he should ever have had mercy on undeserving sinners like them. Humbled before the cross, they desire to live the rest of their lives only 'to the praise of his glorious grace' and to spend eternity worshipping the Lamb who was slain.<sup>153</sup>

2. Predestination is said to foster uncertainty, and to create in people a neurotic anxiety as to whether they are predestined and saved or not. But this is not so. If they are unbelievers, they are entirely unconcerned about their salvation, until and unless the Holy Spirit brings them under conviction of sin as a prelude to their conversion. If they are believers, however, even when passing through a period of doubt, they know that in the end their security lies only in the eternal, predestinating will of God. Nothing else can bring such assurance and comfort. As Luther wrote in his comment on verse 28, predestination 'is a wonderfully sweet thing for those who have the Spirit'.

3. Predestination is said to foster apathy. For if salvation is entirely God's work and not ours, people argue, then all human responsibility before God has been undermined. But again this is not so. On the contrary, it is abundantly clear that Scripture's emphasis on God's sovereignty never diminishes our responsibility. Instead, the two lie side by side in an antinomy, which is an apparent contradiction between two truths. Unlike a paradox, an antinomy is

'not deliberately manufactured; it is forced upon us by the facts themselves ... We do not invent it, and we cannot explain it. Nor is there any way to get rid of it, save by falsifying the very facts that led us to it.' A good example is found in the teaching of Jesus, who declared both that 'no-one can come to me unless the Father ... draws him'<sup>156</sup> and that 'you refuse to come to me to have life'. Why do people not come to Jesus? Is it that they cannot? Or is it that they will not? The only answer which is compatible with his own teaching is, 'Both, even though we cannot reconcile them.'

4. Predestination is said to foster complacency, and to breed antinomians. For, if God has predestined us to eternal salvation, why should we not live as we please, without moral restraint, and in defiance of divine law? Paul has already answered this objection in chapter 6. Those whom God has chosen and called he has united to Christ in his death and resurrection. Having died to sin, they now live a new life to God. And elsewhere Paul writes that 'he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight'. Indeed, he has predestined us *to be conformed to the likeness of his Son* (29).

5. Predestination is said to foster narrow-mindedness, as the elect people of God become absorbed only in themselves. The opposite is the case. The reason God called one man Abraham and his one family was not for their blessing only, but that through them all the families of the earth might be blessed. Similarly, the reason God chose his Servant, that shadowy figure in Isaiah whom we see partly fulfilled in Israel, but specially in Christ and his people, was not only to glorify Israel but to bring light and justice to the nations. Indeed these promises were a great spur to Paul (as they should be to us) when he courageously broadened his evangelistic vision to include the Gentiles.<sup>161</sup> Thus, God has made us his own people, not that we should be his favourites, but that we should be his witnesses, 'to proclaim the glorious deeds of him who has called you out of darkness into his marvellous light'.

So the doctrine of divine predestination promotes humility, not arrogance; assurance, not apprehension; responsibility, not apathy; holiness, not complacency; and mission, not privilege. This is not to claim that there are no problems, but to indicate that they are more intellectual than pastoral.

Certainly the point Paul singles out for emphasis in verse 29 is pastoral. It concerns the two practical purposes of God's predestination. The first is that we should *be conformed to the likeness of his Son*. In the simplest possible terms, God's eternal purpose for his people is that we should become like Jesus. The transformation process begins here and now in our character and conduct, through the work of the Holy Spirit, but will be brought to completion only when Christ comes and we see him,<sup>164</sup> and our bodies become like the body of his glory. The second purpose of God's predestination is that, as a result of our conformity to the image of Christ, *he might be the firstborn among many brothers*, enjoying both the community of the family and the pre-eminence of the firstborn.

We now come to Paul's third affirmation: *those he predestined, he also called* (30a). The call of God is the historical application of his eternal predestination. His call comes to people through the gospel, and it is when the gospel is preached to them with power, and they respond to it with the obedience of faith, that we know God has chosen them.<sup>168</sup> So evangelism (the preaching of the gospel), far from being rendered superfluous by God's predestination, is indispensable, because it is the very means God has ordained by which his call comes to his people and awakens their faith. Clearly, then, what Paul means by God's call here is not the general gospel invitation but the divine summons which raises the spiritually dead to life. It is often termed God's 'effective' or 'effectual' call. Those whom God thus calls (30) are the same as those 'who have been called according to his purpose' (28).

Fourthly, *those he called, he also justified* (30b). God's effective call enables those who hear it to believe, and those who believe are justified by faith. Since justification by faith has been an overarching topic of Paul's earlier chapters, it is not necessary to repeat what has already been said, except perhaps to emphasize that justification is more than forgiveness or acquittal or even acceptance; it is a declaration that we sinners are now righteous in God's sight, because of his conferment upon us of a righteous status, which is indeed the righteousness of Christ himself. It is 'in Christ', by virtue of our union with him, that we have been justified. He became sin with our sin, so that we might become righteous with his righteousness.<sup>170</sup>

Fifthly, *those he justified, he also glorified* (30c). Paul has already several times used the noun 'glory'. It is essentially the glory of God, the manifestation of his splendour, of which all sinners fall short (3:23), but which we rejoice in hope of recovering (5:2). Paul also promises both that if we share Christ's sufferings we will share his glory (8:17) and that the creation itself will one day be brought into the freedom of the glory of God's children (8:21). 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 with the glory of God.

Many students have noticed that the process of sanctification has been omitted in verse 30 between justification and glorification. Yet it is implicitly there, both in the allusion to our being conformed to the image of Christ and as the necessary preliminary to our glorification. For 'sanctification is glory begun; glory is sanctification consummated'. Moreover, so certain is this final stage that, although it is still future, Paul puts it into the same aorist tense, as if it were past, as he has used for the other four stages which *are* past. It is a so-called 'prophetic past' tense. James Denney writes that 'the tense in the last word is amazing. It is the most daring anticipation of faith that even the New Testament contains.'

Here then is the apostle'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. It resembles a chain of five links, each of which is unbreakable.<sup>1</sup>

## **Additional Resources:**

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**Song:** “All things,” Andrew Peterson

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ele0jOhopyI>

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<sup>1</sup> John R. W. Stott, [\*The Message of Romans: God’s Good News for the World\*](#), *The Bible Speaks Today* (Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 246–253.