

THE GIFT THAT KEEPS ON GIVING

by Danny Hall

We were out yesterday doing some shopping. We went to one store and got in line to buy something, and they said, "Sorry, we do only returns here." We looked up, and there were at least as many cash registers marked "for returns only" as there were for people to make new purchases. This whole gift-giving season sort of gets to you sometimes. We've all probably practiced that sincere, plastic smile we use when we say how much we love that gift someone gave us out of the goodness of their heart, but which turned out to be the last thing in the world we would ever want.

Sometimes we're on the other side of the giving anxiety. Have you ever given someone a gift and watched them smile and say how much they liked it, when inside you were wondering, "Do they really like it, or are they really terribly disappointed?"

But sometimes you get just the perfect gift that's exactly what you wanted. My son gave me a pull-cart for my golf clubs this year. It was exactly what I needed. There was no need to be insincere.

In this message we're going to look at the greatest gift ever given. In the Christmas season, of course, our thoughts return to that wonderful gift of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Now there is a gift that's exactly what we need! But sometimes it may not seem that way. I don't know about you, but when I get really honest about my walk with the Lord, there are times when my faith doesn't seem like a gift at all. It happens when things are rough, when I'm struggling spiritually, when things don't seem to be working out the way I want them to. I must confess, the thought crosses my mind, "Is it really worth it?" At such times, we have to return to the core truth of what the gift of Christ really means.

I want to invite you to return with me to a familiar passage of Scripture--sort of like paying a holiday visit to an old friend. This passage reminds us of this wonderful gift and what it really means. For unlike so many gifts that we get for Christmas--especially toys we got as children or gave to our own children that broke before the day was out--this is a gift that keeps on giving. From the moment of its initial transfer from God to us, it's a lifelong, eternal gift. And its transforming power is such that by returning to a familiar text about this great gift, not only can we be thankful again for what Christ has done for us, but we can face into the new year with hope and courage, regardless of what comes our way.

If you were to take a poll among Christians around the world throughout history as to what the ten greatest chapters in all the Bible were, I think Romans 8 would appear on most people's lists. We're going to return to that great passage now. We don't have the time here to plumb the depths of even the portion of it that we're going to examine, verses 28-39. But we can draw from it some encouragement and challenge.

And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose. For whom He foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the first-born among many brethren; and whom He predestined, these He also called; and whom He called, these He also justified; and whom He justified, these He also glorified.

What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how will He not also with Him freely give us all things? Who will bring a charge against God's elect? God is the one who justifies; who is the one who condemns? Christ Jesus is He who died, yes, rather who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who also intercedes for us. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or

famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? Just as it is written,

**"For Thy sake we are being put to death all day long;
we were considered as sheep to be slaughtered."**

But in all these things we overwhelmingly conquer through Him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Let me briefly give you the context of these words. This comes at the close of Paul's major development of the doctrine of salvation. He began building a case for the need for salvation in chapter 1. And from the end of chapter 1 well into chapter 3, Paul argues from many different angles and from different kinds of supporting evidences in life and in Scripture to come to the grand conclusion that every single one of us is a sinner. All of us are in deep need of some special intervention of God. There is nothing inherent in us and nothing we can do to earn God's favor. We all fall short of the glory of God.

In 3:20, there's a radical turn in Paul's thinking as he introduces us to a righteousness of God apart from the law and from the futility of our own efforts. There is the possibility of true righteousness in Jesus Christ. Paul then develops the marvelous story of God's salvation, in which he graciously sent his Son to die for our sins, and then out of that, he issues forth new life in him.

As Paul comes to chapter 8, he wants us now to look into the future with hope. After celebrating the gift of the Holy Spirit, who is God's gracious provision for our living in Christ day by day, in the middle of this chapter Paul reminds us that there is a future glory for us. He gives what I call the proverbial good news/bad news scenario. The bad news is this: This is not heaven, as much as we would like it to be. We wish that all of the baggage of our own sinfulness and that of the sinful world were removed, and we could achieve a level of heavenly bliss here, but we're not going to. The good news is the same: This is not heaven--there's more. There's a glory awaiting that our soul yearns for. And Paul says we and the very creation itself long for that final redemption, the day when we will finally see that full and complete glory and salvation.

Finally Paul comes to 8:28-39, in which he reminds us of some perspectives that allow us then to live boldly and confidently in the days ahead. So let's look at a few of the truths in this passage. Now, each one of these verses would require a very long sermon in itself for me to develop all of the richness in them. But I will suggest that in this passage there are two great sections that give us a perspective we need in order to live with confidence as we go forward into the future. The first one, in verses 28-30, concerns the goal of the Christian life. Where is God taking us in all this? And as we understand that goal, we then learn that we can trust a sovereign, loving Father who will finish his work in us. In verses 31-39, we have the second great section of this passage, which concerns an unwavering hope we can have, no matter what comes our way, based on this assurance that God is bringing us to glory.

OUR GOAL--CONFORMITY TO CHRIST'S IMAGE

In verses 28-30, Paul is describing for us a process. And that process is leading toward a certain goal: "to be conformed to the image of His Son." This is the ultimate destiny for believers in Jesus Christ. God is committed to it. In fact, a very good definition of spiritual maturity is an ever-increasing consistency in the display of the character of Christ in our life. None of us achieves perfection in this life, but there should be this maturing process.

Unfortunately, for many of us that's not the way the goal of the Christian life has been presented. There are some who would try to convince us that the goal of the Christian life here on this earth is for us to be blessed. They define that in many ways, often in terms of material things. God doesn't want us to have adversity in our life. He wants us to be free from pain, poverty, and disease, to live in a state of blessedness--almost heaven on earth. But there's none of that in Paul's thinking in this passage. Rather, he promises us that the journey God is taking us on will culminate in our being conformed to the image of Christ. And when we have that goal in mind, it gives us a perspective on life that helps us deal with the adversity.

The process that God uses to bring us to maturity in Christ is the crucible of life itself. That's what verse 28 is all about. It says that God causes all things to work for good. This verse has been difficult for many people. For one thing, it's translated different ways. Some texts read, "God causes all things to work together for good..." It seems that most of the best manuscripts say, "All things work together for good..." But regardless of how it gets translated, the implication is the same. Paul is saying there is a sovereign God, a loving Father, at work in our lives and in our world. And in the course of our lives we will encounter all kinds of things--adverse situations and positive situations. But God uses the circumstances of our life as tools in his hands for our good. And he defines that good in the next verse as moving toward conformity to the image of Christ. As we learn to trust him, in spite of what comes our way, and allow God to mold us, we are conformed more and more into that image of Christ.

The promise of the completion of this process gives us hope. We see it in this list of words that describe the unfolding process. Paul says that the ones that God foreknew he also predestined, the ones he predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son he also called, the ones he called he also justified, and the ones he justified he also glorified. Interestingly enough, all of those verbs are in the past tense, including the last one, "glorified." Theologically, we tend to think of glorification as that state in the future when the process of our sanctification is complete and we are indeed fully conformed to the image of Christ in eternity. In terms of time and space, it's something yet to be for all of us who are walking with Christ. And yet in Paul's mind it's a done deal. Just as surely as we have placed our faith in Christ and have been justified, we will also be glorified.

We don't have time, and I don't have the intellectual capacity, to define the words "foreknew" and "predestined" and to clear up all the problems associated with them. Whatever they might mean in all of their complexity and wonder throughout Scripture, it is absolutely clear in this passage that the objective of our predestination is for us to be like Christ. And God guarantees his work will be completed, step by step.

When we think about salvation, we tend to focus on what I call the transaction of conversion, on that moment in time when we come to the understanding of the gospel of Jesus Christ and we place our faith in him. And we wrestle with what one has to know and do in order to be "saved." But we should all agree that we need to recognize that we are sinners, that God has provided a payment for the penalty of our sin in Jesus Christ, that he offers us forgiveness in Jesus Christ and invites us to accept that gift by faith. When a person does that, there's a transforming moment when he comes into personal faith in Jesus Christ and, in the vernacular, is "saved." Then our minds often jump from that point to the end of the process: We get to go to heaven. For many of us, what we mean is, "Whew! I don't have to go to hell."

But Paul's understanding of salvation is much more comprehensive, as this passage reveals. The process of salvation is about God's preparing us for glory. It begins with the removal of the barrier to personal relationship with him. It continues with our justification in Jesus. When we place our faith in his atoning death, God forgives us of our sin, removes that penalty from us, and indeed acquits us of the guilt of our sin in Christ. But then, being committed to preparing us for eternity with him, he begins to restore us in the process that we call sanctification, which just means God is working out that salvation in our life, that we might be conformed to the image of Christ. Hebrews 2:10, speaks of Jesus' bringing many sons to glory. God is preparing us for glory in a lifelong process of growth and development.

Now verses 31-39, draw a grand conclusion based on this whole process that God is taking us through toward glory: We have an unshakable hope. This is Paul's second great emphasis. Verse 31 is the summary verse for the whole paragraph: "If God is for us, who is against us?" That's pretty plain. Perhaps you've heard the old cliché, "Me and God make a majority." No matter what the obstacle is, no matter what or who the foes are, we're adequate.

WE LACK NO SPIRITUAL RESOURCE

In the verses that follow, Paul details three implications of that wonderful assurance that give us incredible hope and courage to live for the future. First of all, we need not fear that we are spiritually inadequate for what God has called us to do in this life as his children. He says it in a wonderful promise to us in verse 32: "He

who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how will He not also with Him freely give us all things?" Do you understand the logic of Paul's argument? We say that we believe the following: We're sinful and cannot have access to God because of our sin. But Jesus Christ is the Son of God incarnate who came to provide the sacrifice for our sin. His death was the atonement that paid that price in full. When we place our faith in this, all our sins past, present, and future are forgiven in Christ, and we have an eternal hope with him. Amen! Then why can't we trust him to give us everything we need to live today? Paul says that's the tough thing.

In the context, Paul is talking about the spiritual necessities of life. Paul's words here in Romans 8, echo Peter's words in 2 Peter 1:3, where he says that everything that pertains to life and godliness has been given to us.

All of us feel spiritually inadequate. I've really gone through this. I'm coming up on the one-year anniversary of what I call "the e-mail that changed my life." Our family lived in Vienna for thirteen years. After the Christmas break last year we were on vacation for a few days. When we came back, I downloaded all the e-mail, and there among the other messages was one from Rich Carlson that said people on the search committee at PBC were ready to fly us to California and interview me for the position of college pastor. I was so overwhelmed I didn't sleep for a couple of days.

This process of discussing the possibility of our family's joining the PBC staff had begun early in the fall, but basically we didn't think anything would happen in the near future. So I was looking at this e-mail from Rich, and it dawned on me that this was serious! I knew the history of PBC as a great teaching church. When I was a student in Bible college, Ray Stedman had come and had taught on the church, and that had opened up the greatness of the body of Christ for me. In light of that legacy, I felt inadequate. And then there was the issue of becoming a college pastor. I thought, "I'm an old guy--my brain's going to have to come out to thaw!" The challenge of how to interact with college students also made me feel inadequate. I had gotten very comfortable in my little niche in ministry in Vienna.

Maybe you go through that: How could I ever be a witness at my job or my school? Who am I? How am I ever going to live for Christ the way he wants?

But Paul says, "You trusted Christ for the big thing, the salvation of your soul. Trust him that he has equipped you with everything you need." In the first part of this chapter he explained how the Spirit of God is alive and working in us. We need not fear a sense of spiritual inadequacy. We can live boldly and courageously for Christ.

WE'RE COMPLETELY JUSTIFIED BEFORE GOD

The second great implication of God's being for us is that we need not fear the accusations of others. "Who will bring a charge against God's elect? God is the one who justifies; who is the one who condemns? Christ Jesus is He who died, yes, rather who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who also intercedes for us." How many times have we been in situations in which people brought accusations against us? "Who do you think you are? Isn't it arrogant to claim that you're a child of God?" In fact, if you get to know me well enough, I'll probably do this to you someday. And you'll do it to me. We'll say, "How in the world could he do that? How could a good Christian act like that?" There are moments when I have my own doubts about myself because of those sins that I can't ever seem to get beyond, that still plague me and cripple me. I think, "Am I still wrestling with this?" I feel so unworthy of God's grace. But Paul is saying there is only one opinion that matters.

There's a story told of Babe Ruth. He came to bat one day, and the first pitch from the young pitcher was called a strike. Babe didn't like the call. He turned around and glared at the umpire and said, "Listen. Me and forty thousand other people in these stands know that last pitch was a ball." The umpire stared right back and said, "Yeah, but mine is the only opinion that counts."

The only opinion about you that matters in all the universe is God's. And God says, "You're my child. I'm committed to you. Let anyone bring any charge against you--I'm the one who justifies you. And when you are

in Christ, you are mine."

WE'LL NEVER LOSE CHRIST'S LOVE

Finally, the third great implication of God's being for us is that we need never fear losing Christ's love. Everything that Paul has said up to this point hinges on one great thing: God loves us in Christ. But what if I were to lose that? In verses 35-39, in lofty words Paul says over and over again, "Nothing can separate us from the love of Christ." I wish Paul hadn't put verse 36 in that glorious paragraph. Verse 35 is so beautiful. Verses 38 and 39 are so glorious. Why did Paul ruin the mood with verse 36? "You're just sheep led to the slaughter." But what's going on here is that we need a fresh understanding of what it means to be loved and protected by our loving Father. Sometimes we're taught spiritually that if you walk with God, nothing bad will ever happen to you. That's not Biblical. Paul is saying quite the opposite. Bad things may happen to you. In fact, you may die for your faith.

In the early days of my life in Vienna, I was traveling in the Communist countries of Eastern Europe. Many times our trips to meet with Christian groups to teach and counsel with them were done under a cloak of total secrecy. There was great danger. All of us who worked in that area of the world during those years can tell all kinds of stories. I was never actually incarcerated or detained, but I was searched and questioned. I went to secret meetings and wondered what would happen to me and the believers who were there when I left that meeting. Sometimes I was in meetings with believers who were persecuted by the secret police after I left.

We in America have seldom had to pay a huge price for following the Lord, so we've almost come to believe that that's our birthright. But Paul is saying, "God may or may not protect you in certain situations." I've seen God miraculously protect and guard his people, and the next day people who were just as faithful and loving to God gave their lives for their faith. Our loving Father sometimes sovereignly offers physical protection, and sometimes he doesn't. What's going on?

What Paul is saying is this: The only protection that matters is protection against losing Christ. And that can't happen. Someone can end your physical life, but they can't take your eternal life or your Savior's love away. We live in a world in which there are all kinds of ambiguities and dangers and problems, and we would like to be protected from those. But we may not be.

Since our family has returned from Vienna, one of the things that we've had to deal with is a sense of insecurity in a new environment. Last spring I went to a re-entry seminar in Vienna for people who were going to be returning to their home countries. One of the things they pointed out is that almost every American who lives abroad, particularly in places like Europe, experiences tremendous fear for their safety when they move back to the United States. And we've felt that. Is it my imagination, or do I hear many more sirens in the night than I ever did in Vienna? Vienna was a really safe city. Our son Christopher could go downtown with his friends on public transportation, come home by himself late at night, and walk from the bus stop up to our house. We never worried about his safety. No one was going to pick him up and carry him off somewhere, or mug him, or beat him up, or whatever. There was basically no violent crime in the city of Vienna. We got used to that.

And the media tell all the bad things about America. You don't really hear a lot of good commentary when you're living abroad. So we had experienced thirteen years of international news propaganda--everybody's in a gang, every time you go out on the streets you're going to get mugged, and drug-dealing is rampant everywhere. We knew that wasn't completely accurate. But when we came back we kept looking around, feeling nervous and jittery. We wondered, "God, can I trust you for protection?" And God would say, "Yes, but understand what protection really is. The protection that I promise you is that you'll never lose me, and my love will endure through everything." Besides that there are no guarantees.

I can't tell you what the new year will have for you. A year ago, I couldn't in my wildest dreams imagine what 1997 would bring for me and my family. Yet I've come to this point knowing two things that are absolutely sure: God is conforming me to the image of Christ, and he will never leave me or forsake me. And because I'm sure of those two things, no matter what I face, I know that I can trust him. I know that I can live confidently, boldly, hopefully. Because I need not fear anyone or anything, I am free to live for the glory of

God and for the good of others. And that's the wonderful, marvelous gift of salvation that keeps on giving, as God works in our lives.

One of the hardest things for me personally about leaving Vienna to come here to California had to do with some dear friends. Ginger and I and Christopher were saying our good-byes, and we thought we were dealing with all the emotional issues. Then we found out a week before we were to leave that one of our dearest friends, a deacon in our church, was diagnosed with esophageal cancer and was basically given no hope of living. It was like a kick in the chest to me. I was getting ready to leave, and I was the only pastor he'd ever had. He had come to Christ under our ministry at the church. I kept asking God, "Why Ian?" Here was a man in his forties with a passionate love for Christ and a gracious spirit, and unlike many people in our church, he wasn't going to be moving away in two or three years. He was a permanent resident of the community. He could grow and be a pillar of the church for the future. We needed people like Ian. Why him? He died less than two months later.

I returned in early September for the funeral. During the service people read a number of letters as remembrances of him. The most powerful of these letters was written by an Austrian man who had shared a hospital room with Ian during the darkest hours in July and August.

When Ian was in the hospital, he and his wife Jenny would often spend long periods of time reading the Scriptures and praying together. At first they would go down the hallway to ensure some privacy for themselves and to respect the privacy of his roommate. But eventually Ian's health deteriorated to the point that he couldn't leave the room. So they graciously asked this man whether they might continue to read the Scriptures and have their devotional time in the room, if it wouldn't offend him. So this man lay in the bed next to Ian day in and day out, listening to the Scriptures being read. Ian graciously reached out, even as he himself was dying, to offer this man comfort and encouragement. Eventually Ian gave him a Bible and inscribed it for him.

Austrians are often very closed, private people. They don't share their personal feelings very easily. They build close personal relationships only with a very narrow group of people. They don't understand why Americans call everybody friend and smile and slap each other on the back. And Austria is a Catholic country, but it's very nominally Christian; very few people have any spiritual interest. But this man wrote a letter to Jenny, and in it he poured out his heart.

I first had cancer in 1991, it comes back more frequently now and in different places. It is hard not to despair, not to be bitter, not to be afraid. In August, I shared a room with Dr. Montague-Rock. As you know, we were both under the same specialist and were both taking chemotherapy. At first it was simply pleasant to share a room with such a pleasant and companionable gentleman, friendly, yet considerate. We would hiccup together watching the news. But, then I began to see something more than that. This man did not grumble, he did not get bad tempered and he was much more ill than I was. Yet, he encouraged me! How strong and steady he was. What could this be? His wife, Jenny, came in twice a day for long periods, never gloomy or tired, always beautiful and smiling. Did they know for certain that he was going to get better? Every evening they went slowly down to the armchairs with two books, then Ian became too weak to do this and they asked me if I mind if they did their evening devotional in the room. Of course not, while I would read my newspaper. But as each day passed I listened more, then I joined them at their invitation. Such tranquillity, such calmness, such quiet strength, such consideration! Always more concerned for me and my wife, when their situation was so much worse. My wife always felt better when she had been with Jenny. Did all this come from believing in God? When it was time for us to leave, Ian gave me a Bible. I will treasure this gift from this man of dignity and strength. He would say that this strength was not him, and so I look in the Bible and hope to find these qualities that come from God. I have shared a room with many people at the clinic over the years, but none I have wished to go back to visit. I was shocked to find Ian back so soon. When I went to visit them, for Jenny was always there, they were both so welcoming and so attentive and I don't know how to describe the atmosphere around them. When I called and heard of Ian's death I felt such a sharp feeling of loss, but Jenny was gentle in her comfort of me. I felt

deprived of a new friend that I hoped to have for many more years. But I will be careful and diligent with the legacy he left me and will continue to read and search out that Way that he walked so tall and confident.

We don't know what's going to happen in our lives, what difficulties we'll face. But God has promised that we have everything we need to face those days. He has promised us that he'll never leave us or forsake us. Though in my human view Ian's death was very untimely, he has been promoted to the glory that God had prepared him for. And even in his terribly hard, painful death by cancer, there was a graciousness and a wonder as God took him through the final stages of the process to bring him home to glory.

What all this does for you and for me is that we can be encouraged. The grace of God is a marvelous gift of Christ. It gives us everything we need. It is a gift that keeps on giving. It's a gift that will take us to the next day and the next and the next.

The Scripture quotations in this message are all taken from New American Standard Bible, © 1960, 1962, 1963, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1995 The Lockman Foundation. Used by permission.

Catalog No. 8156
Romans 8:28
Single Message
Danny Hall, College Pastor
December 28, 1997

[Back to Index Page](#)
[Back to PBC Home Page](#)

Copyright© 1996 [Discovery Publishing](#), a ministry of [Peninsula Bible Church](#). This data file is the sole property of Discovery Publishing, a ministry of Peninsula Bible Church. It may be copied only in its entirety for circulation freely without charge. All copies of this data file must contain the above copyright notice. This data file may not be copied in part, edited, revised, copied for resale or incorporated in any commercial publications, recordings, broadcasts, performances, displays or other products offered for sale, without the written permission of Discovery Publishing. Requests for permission should be made in writing and addressed to Discovery Publishing, 3505 Middlefield Rd. Palo Alto, CA. 94306-3695.