

# GOD'S GOOD PURPOSE

SERIES: BOUND FOR GLORY



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Romans 8:28–30  
Fourth Message  
Scott Grant  
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*Romans 8:28–30*

We come now in our study to one of the best-known verses in the Scriptures: Romans 8:28. In this verse, the apostle Paul makes an absolutely stunning claim. If unbelievers could somehow believe what this verse espouses, they would begin flocking to Christ. If believers could somehow wrap their hearts around the truth contained in it, they would find new strength to hope in the Lord.

Romans 8:28-30 constitutes the conclusion of the section that begins in Romans 8:18. The overall section begins with the noun “glory” in verse 18 and ends with the verb “glorify” in verse 30. As a whole, the passage concerns glorification: the glorification of God’s people. One day, those of us who follow Christ will reign with Christ in the new creation. Indeed, we’re bound for glory.

We saw last week that God’s creation groans, God’s people groan, and God’s Spirit groans. What comes of all this groaning? The answer is breathtaking.

## The things God uses

**Romans 8:28:**

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

The material God uses to create good is comprehensive: “all things.” God uses everything seen and everything unseen, everything good and everything evil, every person, place, and event. He uses all things at all times.

Especially from perspective of Romans 8, God uses suffering and the groans that emerge from suffering: the groaning of God’s creation, the groaning of God’s people, and the groaning of God’s Spirit.<sup>1</sup> Especially today, we need to recognize that all things include a microscopic virus.

God takes all things, he makes them work together, and he creates something good.

More particularly, he makes all things work together for good “for those who love God,” who are also defined as “those who are called according to his purpose.” These descriptions of the people of God were first applied to Israel of old. Those who love God, in Spirit-inspired response to him, have fulfilled the most important part of the Mosaic Law, demonstrating that the Spirit dwells in them and that they are members of the new covenant people of God (Deuteronomy 6:5, Romans 2:29). The new people of God, like the Israelites of old, are called according to God’s purpose (Exodus 19:5-6).

Verse 28, however, leaves us with two questions: 1) What is good? 2) What is God’s purpose? Combining the two questions leaves us with one question: What is God’s good purpose? The preceding context would lead us to conclude that it has something to do with the glorification of God’s people and the liberation of God’s creation. Such a conclusion is borne out by verses 29-30, where Paul explains why we know that all things work together for good. What comes of all this groaning? Something unimaginably beautiful.

Paul says that we *know* that all things work together for good. Even if circumstances may cause us to doubt what Paul espouses, there’s no doubt about it.

## Wait hopefully

In *The Count of Monte Cristo* by Alexandre Dumas, the count leaves us with these words: “Live and be happy, beloved children of my heart, and never forget that, until the day comes when God will deign to reveal the future to man, all human wisdom is contained in these words: ‘Wait and hope!’”

That’s not bad. Moreover, something happens to us as we wait and hope, or wait hopefully, as the prophet Isaiah reminds us: “but they who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength; / they shall mount up with wings like eagles; / they shall run and not be weary; / they shall walk and not faint” (Isaiah 40:31).

We gain new spiritual strength *as* we wait hopefully. We find supernatural strength to endure and even to

flourish. In the process of waiting and hoping, we are exercising spiritual muscles, if you will. Connecting with what the Lord will do in the future gives us strength for today.

This means you can not only survive difficult circumstances, you can also flourish—even soar like eagles—in the middle of them. As you wait hopefully, the Lord is forming you into the man or woman he wants you to be, not only in this creation but also, and more importantly, in the new creation.

## Glimpses of glory

The good that Romans 8:28 promises, then, is still in the future. And it will continue to be in the future until Christ returns and we begin to reign with him in the new creation. Paul therefore challenges us quite simply to believe, especially to believe that even when everything looks hopeless, God is causing all things to work together in order to one day glorify his people and liberate his creation.

Ah, but as Tom Petty sings, “Waiting is the hardest part.” Maybe that’s why God gives us glimpses of glory in the present. If then in the present we see God using some things, even suffering, for some kind of good, then he is encouraging us to believe that he is working his alchemy.

The classic biblical example is Joseph, who was abused by his brothers. Not least because his brothers abused him, Joseph ended up in a position, as a ruler in Egypt, where he could provide famine relief. He told his brothers, “As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today” (Genesis 50:20).

Or consider the crucifixion of God’s Son. The only completely innocent man who ever lived died a brutal, God-forsaken death. Was a greater injustice ever committed? Did anyone ever suffer more? Yet God worked things together, including all the evil that went into putting Jesus on the cross, for good—for our good, by the way.

In our day, the pandemic, which has caused untold suffering, has created new opportunities for the gospel.

We’re hearing reports of people watching our livestream worship services who would never darken the doors of the church. They’re watching and listening as the Gospel is preached. That’s good.

In a recent survey by the Pew Research Center, one-quarter of U.S. adults and forty-two percent of those who identify as evangelicals say their faith has become stronger because of the pandemic.<sup>2</sup> That’s good.

## Father-daughter adventure

I am particularly challenged as a gift giver. Mother’s Day was coming up, and all I could think of getting Karen, my wife, was some lotion. Problem: I had just given her some lotion for her birthday, and even then it was at her suggestion.

My daughter Christina had an idea, however. We have a planter box in our backyard that hasn’t been used for a few years, and Christina had heard Karen mention that it might be nice to plant some vegetables this spring. So Christina proposed that we go get some soil and vegetables as a Mother’s Day gift.

So the day before Mother’s Day, Christina and I headed off to Home Depot in Sunnyvale, even though I was worried that there would be a long line to get in. When we arrived, however, there was no line. But we didn’t really know what we were doing, and we asked three different workers for help, and they didn’t know what they were doing either. I was getting frustrated.

Then finally we found someone who was able to identify the kind of soil we needed, but he also said that the store was out of the large bags that would be necessary to fill our planter box. “Why don’t you try our Santa Clara store?” he said. Now I was really frustrated.

Christina, though, wasn’t frustrated in the least. She said to me, rather cheerfully, “Come on, Dad. This is an adventure!”

Hmm. I thought to myself, “Well, that’s what I preach: life is an adventure. Now my daughter is echoing my own sermons back to me.” Who was I to protest?

We left the parking lot and headed off for Santa Clara, even though I was worried that there would be a long line and that this store wouldn’t have what we needed, either. Christina looked at her phone and said, again rather cheerfully, “It’s only ten minutes. Come on, Dad, this is your wife! This is my mother! This is Mother’s Day!”

Ten minutes later, we pulled into the parking lot of the Santa Clara store, and (you guessed it) there was a long line to get in, all the way out to the street. I was

frustrated again. Christina, true to form, said cheerfully, “They’re probably letting everyone in stages. Come on, Dad, let’s get in line.”

We got in line. We waited twenty minutes and we were in the store. The store had the big bags of soil and the vegetables we needed. After we loaded the goods into the car, Christina gave me a high five and said, “We did it!” Karen is difficult to surprise, but when we took her out to the backyard on Mother’s Day, she was surprised—and delighted.

Some things that frustrated me—workers who couldn’t help us, one store that didn’t have what we needed, another store that had a long line outside it—worked together for some kind of good. My frustration prompted my daughter to encourage me, thereby turning our trip into a great father-daughter adventure that honored my wife on Mother’s Day.

If the trip had gone the way I wanted it to, it would have been routine. Because it didn’t go the way I wanted it to, I saw God work things together for a kind of good that I never could have imagined.

If we can occasionally see some things working together for some kind of present good, then we can be strengthened in our faith that all things are working together for the final and eternal good: the glorification of God’s people and the liberation of God’s creation.

## **Bow in worship**

Consider both the power of God and the goodness of God on display in Romans 8:28: first the power of God to make everything *work together* and second the goodness of God to make everything work together *for good*. If you have a god who is powerful but not good, you have a tyrant. If you have a god who is good but not powerful, you have a figurehead. Our God is all-powerful and all-good.

To see behind the scenes into what God is doing, to understand where everything is headed, to believe that God will redeem every evil and to appreciate that we are bound together with all creation and the Holy Spirit in God’s plan to bring healing to the cosmos, is to find ourselves compelled to bow in worship before our Creator and Redeemer.

In verses 29-30, Paul explains why we know that all things work together for good.

## **Conformed to the image**

**Romans 8:29-30:**

**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.**

We can be confident of the fulfillment of God’s good purpose because of his disposition and actions toward us: he foreknew us, he predestined us, he called us, he justified us, and he glorified us. Each of these dispositions and actions is like a link in an unbreakable chain that ensures the success of God’s good purpose. These are five powerhouse verbs.

God’s foreknowledge of us, which preceded not only our birth but also the foundation of the world, is his loving disposition toward us. Our knowledge that all things work together for good is based on God’s foreknowledge. The next link is predestination, in which God determined to put his loving disposition toward us into action. He did so through his effective call of us in the Gospel (2 Thessalonians 2:14). In justifying those who responded in faith to the Gospel, he declared them to be his people. Our future glorification is so certain that Paul can say, in a rhetorical way, that those who have been justified in the present have already been glorified.

For us to be glorified and reign with Christ in the new creation, we must be, and we will be, “conformed to the image of his Son.”

Since sin invaded the world, humanity has not borne the image of God as it once did: “For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23). But the Son of God bears the image flawlessly (2 Corinthians 4:4, Colossians 3:15). God will bring to completion his plan to restore us as his image bearers so that we, like Christ in his humanity, perfectly reflect the glory of God and reign over his creation with wisdom. God uses everything, particularly suffering, to accomplish this good purpose.

## **Share his sufferings**

The most powerful “image” of the Son of God depicts him hanging on a cross. It tore Christ apart—quite literally—when he sought to bring the pain of the world and the love of God together.

If we are to be conformed to the image of God's Son, we will suffer in many ways, but particularly as he did: going to places of pain—sometimes in person, sometimes in prayer—in the name of love. And if you feel that you are being torn apart, like God is pulling in one direction and the wounded world is pulling in the other, you're in good company. The cross, as God's Son died on it, became the image of God's love for a wounded world. Now we are bearing that image along with him.

By suffering ourselves, we “share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death” (Philippians 3:10). We “suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him” (Romans 8:17). Even now, we are being conformed to the image of God's Son (2 Corinthians 3:18). We're becoming more human, if you will.

What, then, does God finally ordain for his Son and for us as his children? He wants Christ to be the “firstborn among many brothers”—that is, he wants his Son to have pre-eminence in his worldwide and eternal family. When we have been so thoroughly conformed to the image of God's Son so that even our bodies look like his after his resurrection, then our adoption will be complete. God wants his Son to have many brothers and sisters with whom to share perfect family fellowship in his new creation.

The deep longing in our hearts for family, so often thwarted, will finally be fulfilled.

## **Do something**

Romans 8, as it allows us to see what God is doing in our lives and in our world, compels us to bow in worship. Bowing in worship, we know we cannot stay there. We must also rise in worship. Knowing how the story ends is no reason to sit around and wait for it to end. Knowing how the story ends, we know what the story is about. We know what we're about.

One day, in a great and grand and eternal adventure, we will bring God's justice, peace, and love to every square inch of creation. That's what we will be doing. That's also what we should be doing.

This is the divine mandate and the human dream, what God calls us to and motivates us to do. Indeed, he gives us the Spirit, the firstfruits of the new creation, to empower us to bring his justice, peace, and love to the world, both creation and the people who inhabit it.

The new age has broken in to this age. The kingdom of God is among you. God places his church in the middle of his creation that it might be a sign of the future. In some way, the future is now so that what we do in this world impacts the new world.

Can we hear the groans, both of creation and our fellow humans? Then it is incumbent on us, as the church of Jesus Christ, with the Spirit's direction and empowerment, to do something.

Some will be sensitive to the groans of the lost. Some will be sensitive to the groans of the environment. Some will be sensitive to the groans of the poor, the weak, or the hurting. Some, feeling what the rest of us can't comprehend, will be drawn to the arts and connect us more deeply with pain and hope (see the work by some of our artists at <https://www.pbc.org/galleryexhibit>). If you don't know what to do, or you're not able to do much of anything, you can always pray—and if you do, you're capable of great things: “The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working” (James 5:16). The Spirit is activating God's people in all sorts of ways during the pandemic.

All of us, if we're sensitive to the Spirit, will want to do something. Because each of us is unique, we each express the divine mandate and human dream differently. That means that whatever God is calling you to do, it's something no one else can do.

## **Leaps and bounds**

In the present, God uses suffering to conform us to the image of his Son so that we might serve his purposes even now, in advance of the day when we will be completely conformed to that image.

Bruce Maez, our Recovery Director, who almost died of COVID-19, writes of how God used the illness in his life:

*I have grown leaps and bounds spiritually through this trial and I believe I will better serve God with more of an urgency and will be able to love people more like him. I know this sounds crazy, but I feel blessed to have walked through this trial, because it causes me to rely completely on him for everything. I realized that if I cannot even take a breath without his help, there is nothing I can do without him. The false pride that has been blinding me for all these years fell from my eyes like scales.*



It sounds as if Bruce is being conformed to the image of God's Son, to love the way Christ loves, doesn't it?

Wait hopefully, and do something.

## **New strength**

Think about it:

All things . . . work together . . . for good.

For you.

Are you suffering right now? If you believe in Jesus, the Spirit is telling you right now that God is using your suffering to bring about your glorification, so that you can be most truly you and reign with Christ in the new creation, bringing all your love and passion and creativity to the task.

What God is doing for you, he's also doing for all your brothers and sisters in Christ. What he's doing for us, he's also doing for all creation. He redeems both his people and his creation, both of which are groaning for glory.

If you don't yet believe in Christ, please come to him. If you do believe in Christ, may God grant new strength to hope in him so that you mount up with wings like eagles.

## **Endnotes**

<sup>1</sup> The words "all things" in verse 28 are also used in connection with the suffering of God's people in verses 35-37: "in all these things we are more than conquerors."

<sup>2</sup> Claire Gecewicz, "Few Americans say their house of worship is open, but a quarter say their faith has grown amid pandemic," *Pew Research Center*, April 30, 2020, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/04/30/few-americans-say-their-house-of-worship-is-open-but-a-quarter-say-their-religious-faith-has-grown-amid-pandemic/>.