

Session 4

THE SAVING IMAGE

Romans 8:28-30

Memory Verse

We know that all things work together for the good of those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.

– ROMANS 8:28, CSB



The Saving Image

THEOLOGICAL THEME: Sanctification gradually moves Christians to increasingly be like Jesus.

The pastor of a prominent Alabama church has an interesting rule for his children getting their driver's licenses. In order for him to take them for the driving test, regardless of their age, they must log 3,000 miles in the car with him. This mileage must also include a long trip that the child must map out himself or herself using an actual paper map. Part of the reason for the requirement is so that the father knows that his children have had significant and varied driving experience prior to releasing them on their own. Additionally, the father wants his children to experience firsthand the frustration of getting lost on the way to a destination, in the worst possible scenario (no GPS or out of range for Google Maps). The father wants his children to learn, in a supervised capacity, how to identify their location, and then to navigate to the pre-arranged destination.

The metaphor of a map is actually quite appropriate in helping believers understand God's call for their lives. From the Christian's perspective, starting at the moment of salvation, a lifelong journey begins with a predetermined destination: Christlikeness. Thankfully, the One who designed the Christian's journey to Christlikeness is God. In fact, not only did He design it, but He also escorts the Christian along the way through the leadership of the Holy Spirit.

In examining Paul's letter to the church in Rome, it becomes quite clear that God has a very specific focus for the Christian's life. God invites the Christian to the journey, knowing the challenges and sufferings that the Christian will encounter as he or she pursues Christ. As Jesus promised, following Him will include opposition and difficulty. Part of being conformed to His image, however, is learning to respond, through the Holy Spirit, in the manner that Christ modeled for His followers.

? If you could teach your children or someone important to you one critical life skill, what would it be? How would you teach them?

? Describe a time when you found yourself lost on a trip. How did you respond? How was the situation resolved? What did you learn?

Session Summary

In this week's session, Paul wrote to the church in Rome regarding the incredible scope of God's work in salvation. Paul taught that Christians are to be gradually conformed to Christ's image, as they increasingly grow in their relationship with Him. Becoming like Christ includes sharing in His trials and sufferings, but those are also part of God's good work in the lives of His people.

1. The Good of God's Work in His People (Rom. 8:28)

Romans 8:28-30 was written at the close of a larger body (verses 18-30), with the primary focus of highlighting the Christian's present suffering compared with future ultimate glory. The end of verse 17, immediately prior to this section, concludes with, ". . . If indeed we suffer with Him so that we may also be glorified with Him." It is important to know this context for a proper understanding of verses 28-30. Romans 8:28 is one of the more frequently taken-out-of-context passages in Scripture, and modern Christians can inadvertently miss the point of what the apostle intended. In verses 26-27, Paul addressed the ministry of the Holy Spirit in interceding for Christians when they do not know what to pray.

Verse 28 continued Paul's assurance of God's ongoing care for His people, mentioning that "all things" work together for the good of those who love Him. As is characteristic of Paul's writing, there are no wasted words. In referring to "all things," Paul had in mind the

sufferings of the present age. Paul believed, as explained by noted scholar Douglas Moo, that “it is the sovereign guidance of God that is presumed as the undergirding and directing force behind all the events of life.”¹ With that as his foundation of belief, Paul could only interpret the sufferings of the present age for the sake of the gospel as also being used by God to bring about “the good.”

The question that logically followed was regarding the substance of “the good.” Considering the harshness of the suffering that the Roman believers experienced (not to mention Paul himself), “the good” that would have redeemed such an experience must have been considerably greater. Indeed it was, as Paul would explain in verse 29. Whatever the substance of “the good,” it was reserved for those who loved God. Moo continues, “‘Loving God’ is therefore a qualification for the enjoyment of this verse, but it is a qualification met by all who belong to Christ . . . [it] sums up the basic inner direction of all Christians—but only Christians.”²



Since this promise is especially for those in Christ, what impact does that have on your perception of how God works in the life of Christians?



Application: Why is recognizing the purpose of “all things” so important for enduring the difficulties of being a Christ follower in a world that largely rejects Him? How have you experienced this in your own life?

Paul included one more descriptor of those for whom all things work together for good: those “who are called according to His purpose.” The descriptor is not meant to be understood carelessly, as a collection of spiritual terms thrown together as one more way to refer to Christians. Rather, it presents the divine side, so to speak, of the previous qualification. Where the Christian would have sensed his or her love for God, this second qualifier referred to the effectual call from God to salvation. Jesus Himself stated in John 6:65 that “no one can come to me unless the Father who sent

me draws him, and I will raise him up on the last day.” As Robert Mounce helpfully explains, “From the human side we love God. From God’s side we are called in accordance with His purpose. By calling Paul meant an effectual calling—one in which our response is invariably positive.”³

2. Becoming Like Christ Is the Goal (Rom. 8:29)

“The good” from verse 28 must find its definition in cooperation with God’s “purpose” at the close of verse 28 (again, no wasted words with Paul). According to Moo, “In these verses Paul spells out the ‘purpose,’ or ‘plan,’ of God. At the same time, however, he also states the ultimate ground for the promise of verse 28 and for the assurance that has been his theme throughout this chapter. The realization of God’s ‘purpose’ in individual Christians is the bedrock of ‘the hope of glory.’”⁴ While much scholarly ink has been spilled in the exegesis on this verse from various theological positions, it is critical not to become so immersed in such arguments that one misses the point Paul made to the Roman Christians, and ultimately to all Christians throughout time.

In explaining the “purpose” for which those who are called to God exist, Paul pointed to their predestination to be conformed to the image of His Son. For whatever else these verses may mean, at the very least Paul intended for Christians to know that God’s purpose for them was to be conformed to the image of Christ. That the believers were foreknown and predestined meant that “now it is God’s purpose to imprint on all those who belong to Christ the ‘image’ of the ‘second Adam,’” according to Moo.⁵ All of this was at God’s initiation and guidance. Conformity to Christ’s image carries application not only in the glorious hereafter, but also in the sufferings of the present state. Just as Christ promised in His farewell discourse, His followers would suffer for His sake just as He did (John 15:18-25). The process of sanctification in the present age would provide opportunity to grow into Christ’s likeness under the direction of the Holy Spirit.



Why is it significant that Christians are called brothers and sisters in Christ? Why do you think this identity is so important for persevering in the world?

? Application: How is difficulty in the life of a Christian reframed when seen through the purpose of being conformed into Christ's likeness? What implications does that have for the way a Christian handles difficulty in this life? What hope does it offer for the future?

At the end of verse 29, Paul referred to Christ as the firstborn of many brothers and sisters. This is a reference to His being the firstborn from the dead (1 Corinthians 15:20). Just as He was resurrected, His atoning work would effectually resurrect many brothers and sisters. Part of being conformed to the image of Christ means being conformed to His glorified state on the other side of His second coming, Moo comments, "It is as Christians have their bodies resurrected and transformed that they join Christ in His glory and that the purpose of God, to make Christ the 'firstborn' of many to follow, is accomplished."⁶

3. Being Conformed Is a Lifelong Process (Rom. 8:30)

Verse 30 concludes the passage by highlighting the process through which God effects His salvation in the experience of the Christian. Returning to the matter of those predestined, Paul worked through the sanctification process from eternity past until its conclusion at the point of glorification. God intervenes in the Christian's life, effectually calling him or her to Himself in salvation. Salvation is made possible because Christ's atoning work justified the believer as He took the sin of the world on Himself and placed His own righteousness on the believer. The Christian, being predestined to conformity in Christ's image, begins the sanctification process under the leadership and empowerment of the indwelling Holy Spirit, being gradually and continually refined into Christ's likeness. That great and gradual process of becoming like Christ is never completed on this side of eternity.

❓ What difference does the qualifier “under the leadership and empowerment of the indwelling Holy Spirit” make in your understanding of how a person grows in Christ? How does it help you process seasons in which Christians struggle and even fail in following Christ? Why is it important to recognize that this process cannot be completed on this side of eternity?

❓ Application: According to the terms Paul used in verse 30, where are you in this process? Can you trace your journey with Christ in these terms?

There is one last piece of the process that is curiously written in the past tense: glorified. Glorification will not happen until after Christ’s second coming. Being that His return is in the future, how is it then that Paul can write it as a past action like the other verbs in verse 30? Paul wrote about glorification from God’s perspective. Because God authored the process and is limitlessly powerful to bring His desires about, the promise of glorification is as certain to come about as if it has already happened. This dynamic is what scholars refer to as “already . . . not yet.” Moo says, “God’s intention, Paul emphasizes, is to bring to glory every person who has been justified by faith in Jesus Christ. Our assurance of ultimate victory rests on this promise of God to us.”⁷

Conclusion

Paul’s letter to the Roman believers remains his fullest explanation of the Christian faith and the life that believers should live as a result. In this letter, chapter 8 is arguably the grandest chapter, containing dense and glorious promises of what it means for believers to be called according to His purpose. Within these three verses, there reside numerous points of discussion and application.

First, there is nothing generic about God’s promise to work all things together for the good of those who love Him. There can be great temptation, while offering encouragement or comfort, to abbreviate this verse to some form of “God’s going to work it out for good.” To do so is to cheapen the verse into a happy moralism, robbing it of its richness. God’s working of things for the good of the Christian is couched in the context of that “good” pertaining to God’s purposes, namely, the believer being conformed to Christ’s image. The promise is expressly for Christians. It does not rule out hardship or suffering. It does not have anything whatsoever to do with material wealth or physical health. God works all things in the Christian’s life together for His purposes, which is always the best possible thing for the Christian ultimately—even if not immediately.

Second, becoming like Christ is a lifelong process that no one can finish on this side of heaven. Paul’s teaching in these verses precludes the ability for any Christian to fall into a mindset that he or she has “already arrived” as it pertains to being conformed to Christ’s image. The prideful idea that insidiously creeps into the minds of Christians that, because they may have grown significantly in Christ over a long period and, therefore, have “done enough” could not be more contrary to Paul’s inspired teaching here. With humility and prayerful willingness, the Christian is increasingly conformed to the image of Christ all of his or her life. So let us not grow weary.

Third, God is intimately involved in the life of the Christian. That statement may seem obvious to the point of passing it by. Please do not. Consider the incredible uniqueness in the way God has drawn each Christian to Himself. Consider the vast array of ways that God has led just the Christians you know away from old lifestyles, old choices, and broken relationships. Consider your own journey and the pivotal turns in the road, so to speak, that He led you through. The God of the universe who created all that has ever been created also deals with such intimacy with His people.

? Who in your life has been the greatest example of God working all things for the good of those who love Him? How have you seen the circumstances in his or her life result in their becoming more like Christ? Why is it important to define “the good” that way?

? Knowing that being conformed to Christ's image is a lifelong process, how should Christians handle seasons of stagnant spiritual growth? How does being a part of biblical community factor into conformity to Christ's image?

? How does it make you feel to know that God understands the depths of what makes you "you"? Even more, what impact does it have on your desire to pray to know that He wants you to come to Him and know Him?

CHRIST CONNECTION: Christlikeness is the goal of every Christian's discipleship.

MISSIONAL APPLICATION: The love God demonstrated through His work of salvation is meant to be shared by Christians with those who do not know Christ. As the gospel is shared, others have the opportunity to become part of Christ's "many brothers and sisters."



FOR NEXT WEEK

The Image of Freedom

Main Passages

- 2 Corinthians 3:12-18

Session Outline

1. The Veiled Glory of Moses (2 Cor. 3:12-14)
2. Finally, Seeing Clearly (2 Cor. 3:15-16)
3. The Image of Freedom (2 Cor. 3:17-18)

Memorize

We know that all things work together for the good of those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.

- Romans 8:28, CSB

Daily Readings

- Monday - Romans 8:29
- Tuesday - Galatians 2:20
- Wednesday - Ephesians 2:4-5
- Thursday - 1 John 4:9-11
- Friday - Romans 8:37-39
- Saturday - Romans 5:8

References

¹Moo, Douglas. *The Epistle to the Romans*. NICNT. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1996.

²Ibid.

³Mounce, Robert H. *Romans*. NAC. Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1995.

⁴Moo.

⁵Ibid.

⁶Ibid.

⁷Ibid.