

Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
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OPPORTUNITIES TO TRUST GOD

Romans 8:28-39

This section in Romans 8 is one of the “go-to” passages I go to often in times when I need to be reminded of God’s sovereign goodness and unfailing love. I know I’m not alone in this. It has been the case for Christian believers for 20 centuries, ever since Paul wrote these faith-filled, hope-inducing words under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. This is not the only “go-to” passage we are inclined to turn to in the moments or seasons when life feels particularly heavy or hard. Another passage to which many of us turn as a touchstone in our lives is Proverbs 3:5-6:

Trust in the LORD with all your heart
and lean not on your own understanding.
In all your ways acknowledge Him (as Lord)
and He will direct your paths.

To this I would add verse 7, which says:

Do not be wise in your own eyes;
Fear the LORD and shun evil.

Many of us are tempted daily, even constantly, to think we know better than others what is good or right or wise in any given situation, or generally to think more highly of ourselves than we ought to think. *The Message* paraphrase of these verses goes like this:

Trust GOD from the bottom of your heart;
don’t try to figure out everything on your own.
Listen for GOD’s voice in everything you do,
everywhere you go;
He’s the One who will keep you on track.
Don’t assume that you know it all.
Run to GOD! Run from evil!
(*Emphasis added*)

Perhaps you have “go-to” verses or passages that you go to often for comfort, encouragement, hope, direction, and strength for living in these days ... such as the 23rd Psalm or the Beatitudes or the “Am” sayings of Jesus, and many more.

John Stott, one of my all-time favorite “go-to” Bible teachers, says that in these verses in Romans 8, Paul “soars to sublime heights unequalled anywhere else in the New Testament” – which is not to say that the words of Paul are somehow more important than the words of Jesus, but simply that the Holy Spirit speaks through Paul here in a profoundly powerful and

beautiful way. Paul’s mind, Stott says, “sweeps over the whole plan and purpose of God from (eternity) past to an eternity still to come, from the divine foreknowledge and predestination to the divine love from which absolutely nothing will be able to separate us.” Paul’s message is that “our Christian hope is solidly grounded on the unwavering love of God. So the burden of Paul’s climax” here in Romans 8 “is the eternal security of God’s people, on account of the eternal unchangeableness of God’s purpose, which is itself due to the eternal steadfastness of God’s love” (John R.W. Stott, *The Message of Romans*, 246).

In the disruptive moments of life – and surely this is one of those moments for us collectively (for our families, for our church family, for our nation, and for people and nations around the world) – the affirmations and promises found in Romans 8 can refresh us and sustain us. They can deepen and strengthen our faith in the goodness, sufficiency, and sovereignty of God. They can remind us that extraordinary circumstances such as these presented by the coronavirus and all its ripple effects constitute opportunities for us to trust God. Which is what I want to encourage you to do in these days:

- To trust God in all the circumstances and details of your life.
- To trust God with the uncertainties of what tomorrow (or even today) may bring as the coronavirus pandemic continues to unfold in dramatic ways.
- To trust God when life goes “sideways” for any reason at all.

Though Romans 8:28, in particular, has been a “go-to” verse for countless Christians, there is a danger of misunderstanding its meaning. In his book *Gold in the Making*, Ron Davis calls it “the best loved, least understood verse in the Bible” (63). Whether that is hyperbole or not, the possibility of misunderstanding Romans 8:28 is a clear and present danger. So let’s take a closer look at it.

The NIV translation reads: “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.”

The ESV translation says: “And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to His purpose.” There is some disagreement about whether the subject in verse 28 is “God” or “all things.” Whichever is the case, Paul is definitely *not* suggesting that “all things” just work out for good by themselves.

Nor does Paul mean that if we truly seek to live as faithful followers of Jesus, God will allow only good things to come into our lives. If this were so, no sincere follower of Jesus would have to be concerned about contracting the coronavirus, or getting cancer, or losing their job, or experiencing any kind of tragedy in life. It does not mean that “everything will come out in the wash” and that God will spare us from the consequences of our own actions, regardless of the mess we have made of our lives. (I don’t mean to suggest that all suffering is a direct result of a person’s sinful choices. We know that isn’t true. We live in a fallen, sin-infected world in which bad things – like the coronavirus and cancer and tragedies – just happen, sometimes to the most godly people we know.)

What Romans 8:28 does mean is that in His sovereign power and grace and love, God can and does bring good out of the worst, most evil and painful circumstances we will ever encounter. It does not mean that everything that happens to us or to those we love is good. But God ... *But. God. Is. Able...* to use all things, including what is evil, to bring about good in our lives. Which means that the day will come (soon, I hope) when we will look back on these extraordinarily stressful times of the coronavirus and see how God has actually used it for good in our own lives, in the life of the church (including our church), in the life of our nation and the nations of the world.

Romans 8:28, says Stott (*The Message of Romans*, 246), is like a pillow on which you can rest your weary head in the midst of the most disruptive moments or distressing events you face in life. It is an affirmation of faith in God and His ability to bring good out of the most evil or tragic events that crash into our lives. *If* our hearts are open to Him.

Can you make this affirmation of faith today?

Verse 28 begins with the words: “And we know ...” (*oidamen de* in Greek). *We know*. Not “we hope” or “we wish” or “we think.” This is not just something we want to be true if it can be true. No. It is something we *know*. How do we know it? We know it to be true by faith. We know it to be true because God has told us it is true in His Word, the Bible. We know it to be true because we have seen it demonstrated in the person and work of God’s Son, our Savior and Lord Jesus Christ. And, even though our vision and understanding are so finite, we know it to be true in our own life experience in this world.

There are lots of things we do not know. We don’t know how long the coronavirus crisis will last. We don’t know how many of us will get it. We don’t know how many people will die from it in our country and the world. The numbers continue to grow by the day. We don’t know when we will be able to meet together again as a church family. We hope it will be sooner rather than later. We don’t know what will happen to the financial markets this week or next month. We don’t know if or when the major league baseball season will start. We don’t know whether President Trump will win re-election to another 4-year term in November, or if Joe Biden will be our next President. None of us knows the day of our death or when Jesus will return. We don’t know if God will use this crisis to cause the American people and our nation as a whole to turn away from our sins and turn back to God in true repentance and faith. We pray He will. We pray that God will send revival to His church and a new Great Awakening to sweep across our land. But we don’t know the secret purposes and plans of God. We don’t know what the future holds for our children or our children’s children.

But some things we do know. We can and do know the truth of Romans 8:28. There are several things we know from this verse:

We know, first of all, that *God is at work in this world – in particular, in the lives of His people*. God is at work in your life and mine. God is not quarantined. He does not engage in social distancing. He is never distracted or preoccupied. He is ceaselessly, energetically, and purposefully at work on our behalf.

Second, we know that God is at work *for the good of His people*, for your good and mine. You have to understand, though, that God's good in your life is not defined by things like good health, a great job, success in your field of expertise, a good reputation, a nice home, financial security, or a comfortable life. God may bless you with all or some of these. Or He may not. What He does bless us all with is His presence and love and grace that is always sufficient, whatever our circumstances. God is far more concerned with your holiness than He is with your happiness. He is far more concerned with your character – with forming the character of Christ in you – than with your comfort.

Yes, God is at work for the good of His people. But it is God's definition of good, not ours, that matters most. The good that God is working out in our lives is described in verses 29 and 30, which we will look at shortly.

Third, we know that God is at work *in all things*, which includes the suffering, the groanings, the hard things, the troubles and tragedies of this life. This can be a really hard thing to grasp, because it is not always possible from our vantage point to see how God can or will bring good out of the worst situations. But we affirm it nonetheless. We walk by faith, as it says in 2 Corinthians 5:7, not by sight. So by faith we declare that nothing that happens in this life, from the most horrific act of violence or terrorism to the worst outbreak of disease imaginable, from the worst natural disaster to the most distressing economic news, from the most traumatic personal experience to the most devastating setback, from the most painful conflict to the most serious medical diagnosis – nothing that happens lies beyond “the overruling, overriding scope of God's providence and unfailing love” (Stott, 247).

In all things. We take God at His Word. We believe God because of who He is. We believe, most of all, because of what He has done for us in the incarnation, life, suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus – through whom He brought salvation, forgiveness, life, peace, joy, and purpose out of the most unspeakable evil, injustice, and suffering.

We know, fourth, that the promise of Romans 8:28 – that in all things God is at work for the good of His people – is for *those who love God and have been called according to His purpose*. Our love for God, of course, is preceded by and rooted in His love for us. 1 John 4:19 says: “We love because He (God) first loved us.” We love *God* because He loved us first. God doesn't love us because we love Him. God's love for you is not contingent on your love for Him. He loved you first. He loved us first. There is nothing fickle about His love. His love for you is unchangeable, which means there is nothing you can ever do to cause God to stop loving you.

We love God because He first loved us and demonstrated His love for us in giving His Son as our Savior, as the one and only atoning sacrifice for our sins. Your love for God is not a kind of merit badge that earns God's love for you. No. Our love for God is simply the grateful response of our hearts to the wonder of His deep, deep love for us.

Do you see that?

The purpose for which God has called us is spelled out in verses 29 and 30, where Paul lays out the five steps in the order of salvation. (In Latin, it is called the *ordo salutis*.) The apostle says: “For those God *foreknew* He also *predestined* to be conformed to the likeness of His Son, that He (Jesus) might be the firstborn among many brothers (and sisters). And those He *predestined*, He also *called*; those He *called*, He also *justified*; those He *justified*, he also *glorified*.”

Do you see the five stages in God’s eternal plan? It embraces the past, present, and future. It begins with God’s foreknowledge and predestination (or foreordaining) in eternity past, before the creation of the world, as the Bible says in Ephesians 1:4. God’s “effectual calling” in our lives and our justification take place during our actual life experience in the present. Our glorification, which Paul here speaks of as an accomplished fact, is still in the future. It is both an “already” and a “not yet.” But it is assured by the sovereign grace and power of God the Holy Spirit.

God’s purpose in all this, as Paul says in verse 29, is to make us “conformed to the likeness (or image) of His Son.” God is in the process of making you and me like Jesus. He wants your life and mine to reflect the life and light and love of Jesus at all times. But especially in times like these, when tensions and fears are running rampant. Jesus Himself said that we are to let our light – the light of Jesus in us – shine before others, so that they may see our good deeds and give praise to our Father in heaven (Matthew 5:14-16).

Unlike some of you, I don’t have much aptitude for science. So I hope I get this right. There is a term used in astronomy called *albedo*. *Albedo* is a measurement of how much sunlight a celestial body reflects. Of the planets in our solar system, Venus has the highest albedo at .75, which means it reflects 75 percent of the sunlight that hits it. Depending on where it is in its orbit, Pluto – is it a planet or not? – has an albedo ranging from .49 to .66. The earth’s albedo is .30. The albedo of Mars is .29. Our celestial night-light, the moon, has an albedo of about .12. It reflects only 12 percent of its sunlight. And yet it lights up the sky on cloudless nights.

Let’s use this astronomical term to make a spiritual application. In effect, each of us has a spiritual albedo. The more you reflect the light and love of Jesus, the higher your albedo. God’s goal for you and me is that each of us would have an albedo of 100 percent by being fully conformed to the likeness and character of Jesus our Lord. (Adapted from Mark Batterson, *If: Trading Your If Only Regrets for God’s What If*, 220.)

The trials God brings or allows to come into our lives, even something as dangerous and disruptive as the coronavirus, are meant to teach us to trust Him more. They are meant to refine us. To deepen and strengthen our faith. To make us more like Jesus. And to increase our spiritual albedo. So that we shine more brightly and reflect more clearly the light and life and love and grace of Jesus our Savior, who is with us and for us and at work in us at all times. To Him be the glory forever and ever.

Lord, let it be so in us. Amen.