

God's Purpose is our Christlikeness

Romans 8:29

April 28, 2019
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I mentioned two weeks ago that Romans 8 is taking us to the deep end of the doctrinal pool. With Romans 8:29 we are in over our heads as the Apostle Paul explains the inner workings of the mind and actions of God to save sinners and glorify his Son. To save sinners and glorify his Son—are those in the right order of importance? Save sinners and glorify his Son or glorify his Son and save sinners? Which of those do you see as more important to God? Which one you prioritize will determine whether Romans 8, 9, 10, and 11 are a massive problem for you or not. Is what God is doing primarily to save sinners OR to glorify himself? Is it first and foremost about us or is it first and foremost about Him? There's a little tip of how I look at it.

Today's text is going to introduce three key Bible terms. Here they are: Foreknowledge. Predestination. Christlikeness. We will touch briefly on the first two as Romans 9 is the deeper dive on those. I want to focus mostly on Christlikeness as the end goal of God's purpose for our lives.

"And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose. 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. And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified." (Romans 8:28–30 ESV)

Verse 28 should go down as one of your favorite verses in the Bible. God works all things for good. However, notice that the verse ends, *"for those who are called according to his purpose."* As we saw, the calling there is not the general call to salvation but the summoning effectual call of God to the sinner to believe. This call creates what it calls for. Like Jesus who said at Lazarus' tomb, *"Lazarus come out,"* (John 11:43) God speaks to the dead human heart and calls new life to the sinner. Without Jesus' call, Lazarus would never come forth and with God's call none of us would ever believe.

"Called according to his purpose." God's purpose? God's will? God's plan? Yes. Is this so unusual? Who here built a house with a set of plans? This auditorium expansion involved a very detailed set of architectural plans. This foundation is expanded here. This beam goes there. These seats are up here, etc. Would you be surprised that something far more complex and far more important would begin in the mind of God? God had a plan and God had a purpose. Paul lets us glimpse at God's architectural plans which guide God's redemptive works.

"For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son." (Romans 8:29)

The verse begins with "for" showing a continued flow of thought. The *"those...he foreknew"* are the same as referred to in verse 28 as those *"who love God...(and) are called according to his purpose."* Not three different groups, but three definitions of the same group. Who are they? The truly redeemed. The people of God. Genuine Christians. The elect. The church. These are all New Testament words describing the same people.

But how do people of God come to be the people of God? How did their status change from under the wrath of God (Romans 1) to under the grace of God (Romans 6)? This explanation includes our verse for next week. Let me read it again.

"And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified." (Romans 8:30)

Do you see the progression? If after the service you asked the construction manager, "How did you build this expansion?" He might say, "We started with plans. According to those plans, we demolished. Where we demolished, we built. Where we built, we completed." The plan became a reality.

This is what Romans 8 explains. Are we surprised that the infinite mind of God includes purposes which our finite minds struggle to comprehend? Our architect could run circles around normal folks like us with technical jargon and load weights and steel tolerances, etc. He's just an architect. Understanding how God did all this to redeem humanity and all creation and glorify the Son, we should expect some things above our theological pay grade. We are introduced to two of those: foreknowledge and predestination.

Foreknowledge

"For those whom he foreknew..." (Romans 8:29)

The word means what it sounds like. To know beforehand. "Post-knew" would be to know afterwards. That's how we operate. We can imagine people, perhaps having a wife or a child, before they are a reality. We meet people, then we say we know them. If someone says they know someone before they meet them or before they exist, they are liars or delusional.

How is God neither a liar nor delusional? God created time. He transcends time. He stands outside of time and knows the end and the beginning all at once.

Foreknowledge = those whom [God] long ago thought of in a saving relationship to himself –(Wayne Grudem)¹

My first memory of foreknowledge was someone explaining it as God looking down through the tunnel of time and seeing in advance who would believe, then choosing, and electing them on the basis of them choosing Jesus. That's less foreknowledge, more *foresee*.

What's the problem with that? Does God know everything? Yes. He's omniscient. Does God have to look ahead in time and discover something? No. God knows everything past, present, and future. Foreknowledge is God "knowing" or thinking of someone in terms of a saving relationship. Foreknowing, Forethinking, Foreloving.

We come to know things. We call it learning. God never learns anything. In fact, his relationship to reality is completely different from ours. In the words of Augustine, *"We know things because they are, but things are because God knows them."*²

¹ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, p. 677.

² Augustine, *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, p. 420.

Notice also, "*whom*" he foreknew. It doesn't say, *what* God foreknew. It says *whom*. Foreknowledge is about persons. Real people.

This is not a perfect analogy, but we loved our daughters before we met them. Love didn't start on the day they were born. We loved them long before that. We loved them the moment the pregnancy test turned blue. We thought of our daughters in terms of love and relationship long before they showed up.

In a much more dramatic and eternal sense, God thought of you, dear Christian, long before you showed up. Before he even created the universe, he was thinking of you in terms of someday knowing, loving, and saving you. Please see this rightly as a biblical indication that salvation begins with God. He is building a sure foundation for assurance of our salvation.

This leads to the second concept here...

Predestination

"For those whom he foreknew he also predestined..." (Romans 8:29)

Predestination. I can't tell you how many times over the years as a pastor I have been asked, *Do you believe in predestination?* I can't remember any names so don't take this the wrong way, but that is a question only a biblically ignorant person would ask. Why? Because predestination is a biblical term. Everyone who trusts the Bible will believe in predestination.

I heard a lecture once on predestination entitled, "Everyone Believes This Doctrine." Indeed. It's a repeated biblical concept, so the question isn't whether you believe in predestination or not, the question is how you define it. On this there is a great debate which I am going to put on the warmer awaiting our exposition in Romans 9.

What I will say now is that foreknowledge is God thinking of us in advance in terms of a saving, loving relationship. Predestination is God thinking and purposing in advance our final destination. Hence, pre-destination. God predetermining our eternal destination.

In a way, we do this anytime we take a trip. We pre-determine our destination. Then we GPS or MapQuest the best route to get there. What we call mapping God calls predestination. He is pre-planning our final destination. Stay tuned for more on this....

This brings us to the third concept and the rest of the sermon. What is the destination God is pre-planning? What is the purpose for those he called (verse 28)? What is the good he is working everything in our lives toward (verse 28)?

Christlikeness

"For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son." (Romans 8:29)

We are predestined to be _____? Saved. Forgiven. Granted eternal life. Going to heaven. These are the common Christian buzzwords that we use to describe the purpose of God saving us. If we look back one verse to verse 28 and its promise that all things work together for good, what good is God promising? To this we hope wealth, health, happiness, friendship, good times all the time. But Romans 8:29 surprises with this purpose, *"to be conformed to the image of his Son."* Are you disappointed? Is this a divine bait and switch?

First, what does it mean? The Son is Jesus. Conformed to the likeness of his Son. "Likeness" is the Greek word for *image* or *icon*. An image is something that resembles something else. For instance, art will often resemble something in nature. A swan, a flower, or even people. We call a painting of someone a portrait. You may recall a few years ago Queen Elizabeth's disappointment when a new portrait of her was done. She didn't think it flattering and she banned it from display. Portraits are pictures made to resemble someone else.

A *doppelganger* is another person you resemble very closely. I get this mentioned to me often as there are a few famous people I closely resemble. Here's the most common one:



What am I doing? I'm wanting you to see that valuing resemblance, portrait, and reflection are part of our culture too.

In fact, wanting to resemble the current "It" person drives billions of dollars in advertising, clothing, hairstyles and fashion. We typically think of this as a teenage obsession, but there are plenty of adults working really hard to look like and sound like whomever is currently popular. These fads come and go, but what lies behind them are people who are striving to look and act like people they admire.

Why? We derive a sense of importance from our sense of their importance. Think of 60,000 Bears fans wearing jerseys with the name of their favorite player. In any other time in history, that would be seen as silly. But at Soldier Field it's incredibly cool and will cost you \$125. It's a derived identity. Derived value. Derived importance.

"For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son." (Romans 8:29) Is this good news? For the Christian, our identity is *in* Christ and our identity is *from* Christ. A derived identity. A derived glory. Is this good news? It depends on how worthy, glorious, beautiful, and wonderful you think Jesus is. The greater He is in your estimation, the better news it is that before time began, God thought of you in a saving way

and destined you to eternal life and purposed to shape and form your character, attitudes, lifestyle, and heart to be a portrait of Jesus the Son of God.

If that doesn't seem that exciting, are you sure that Jesus is your Savior and Lord? How can he be our Savior and Lord without highly valuing him and greatly desiring to be like him? I can hear people quietly scolding Christians wanting to be like Jesus, but then you go to their house and it's all shiplap because Joanna Gaines said that's cool. Young people, who's your hero? Who do you want to look like, sound like, be like? Who is wonderful enough to inspire you to take up his cross and follow him with your whole life?

Modern people are obsessed with resembling the culturally important people and the Bible comes along and promises God is doing a makeover of our whole lives such that we will increasingly resemble the greatest and most wonderful person of all time. How can we see this as anything but great news? This is so sure that God talks about it as our pre-destiny.

You may be confused because you have heard this described with different words. Growth as a Christian. Sanctification. Holiness. See it this way.

Sanctification = Holiness = Christlikeness

"For this is the will of God, your sanctification." (1 Thessalonians 4:3)

Does God want me to be sanctified or like Christ? They are the same thing. Does God want me to live a holy life or a Christlike life? It's the same thing.

How do we conform to the likeness of Christ?

There is a lot more to come, but let me summarize it with, *"And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit."* (2 Corinthians 3:18)

Through the gospel and by the Spirit of God, a Christian is someone who beholds the glory of Jesus, though not perfectly. Paul says elsewhere, we see him like in a foggy mirror (1 Corinthians 13:12). But by faith we see in Jesus' life, death, and resurrection true glory and beauty. We behold the glory of the Lord. We perceive in him divine glory and place in him all our eternal hope.

The Spirit of God indwells us. Our eyes are wide open to his beauty. The Christian life is an ongoing experience of beholding, seeing, the glory of Jesus. How? Primarily through Scripture but also through the church family, life's trials, and our own maturing in Christ. As we see and savor him, the Spirit of God works to change our lives, values, perspectives, attitudes, and actions to slowly but increasingly resemble Jesus. We are being changed progressively. We are being sanctified progressively. We are being transformed more and more into the likeness of Christ.

But as we saw in Romans 7, none of us in this life get there completely. We will always have indwelling sin on this earth. But there is coming a time when we will instantly and completely resemble Jesus. *"Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is."* (1 John 3:2) That moment of resurrection and glorification will mean instant and full Christlikeness. Our moral character will be perfect. Our desires fully his. No

more struggle with sin. No more struggle with self. Our worship forever will completely be *All about Him*.

Why does the Father purpose to make us like his Son?

God the Father loves God the Son. He loves Jesus far more perfectly than any human parent has ever loved a child. Yet, what do human parents so enjoy doing? Looking at pictures of their kids. Jennifer and I have found this to be true. When we get a babysitter and head out alone, it's fantastic! No messing with a baby seat or sippy cups or the potty. We get to the restaurant and within 10 minutes, we are looking on our phones at pictures of who? Our daughters. Bizarre parental love.

Whatever we feel or how highly we value our kids, God values Jesus more. His foreknowledge, predestination, election, calling, and all the rest are for the eventual goal of populating eternity with little Jesus Jr.s. Living, breathing pictures and portraits. Living and breathing doppelgangers of the glorious and preeminent Son of God.

And all the trials and troubles, all the joys and sorrows, all the sermons and service, all the prayers and penance, all the everythings of our lives are part and parcel of God's loving us in eternity past so that we may be like Jesus for eternity future. For Christians, there is no better news.

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