

Sermon 77: Romans 8:28a: God's Working is the Grounds of our Assurance

OUTLINE

Knowing not feeling
God's character and His ways
Knowing God's purpose

INTRODUCTION

Paul's overview of the Gospel and the grounds of our assurance have been very thorough so far. However, we now come to the bedrock of the grounds of our assurance. We have viewed Christ as our propitiation and our Second Adam as the grounds for our salvation, we have been noting the many ministries of the Spirit on our behalf which make us secure in our salvation. However, now we come to the deepest grounds of our assurance and themes that will govern the next one and a half chapters. The most basic reason why we can know that we will ultimately be saved is because God has chosen to save us. God's plan and God's power to execute His plan is the most basic ground of our assurance. The bedrock of our assurance is not our own faith, our own repentance, our own holiness and obedience, it is not ultimately our prayers, or anything that we can do or contribute. We are saved, are being saved and will be saved because God has chosen it to be so. God has purposed to save us and has exercised all His resources and might to bring His desire to pass, our final guarantee of salvation does not rest on my endurance or power or anything in myself but in God's plan and ability to make His plan come to pass.

So in the present discussion going on in this section of Romans where Paul has been talking about suffering and living in a fallen world he reminds us of God's plan to save and His rule over the universe not only to cause us to get into heaven by the skin of our teeth, but to take all the bad and turn for the good of those who love Him so that we are more than conquerors in Christ. 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.' Verses 29-30 serve as a further explanation of God's purpose mentioned in v28b and the extent to which His purpose extends, from eternity past all the way into eternity future, and His omnipotence will oversee it all the way, '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 have beheld some amazing mysteries so far, but I must warn you we are going to be confronted with some of the greatest mysteries of the faith as we look at the next chapter and a half. We have to with finite minds look into the infinite power, plan and character of God. Our exploration into this next section will be one of finding some answers to great mysteries but that will also leave us with many questions. We will have to constantly remind ourselves that God has not revealed all and that the various mysteries we will encounter should cause us to adore and worship not sue for more revelation than God in His

wisdom has chosen to give. I urge us all as we prepare for this next section of Romans to pray for humility and wisdom; wisdom to know all that God has revealed and humility to accept when God has chosen to withhold information. Let us pray for hunger and contentment, hunger for all the revelation God has given us of His character and ways, and contentment when He chooses to withhold.

We begin our journey by looking at the first part of v28. Here we will be looking at how Christians are to think on God, how Christians are described in their dealings with God, and how Christians are kept by God.

Knowing not feeling

As Paul seeks to ground our assurance in God's person and power he talks about what Christians ought to know, 'and we know....' The reference to knowledge is a very natural one for Paul but significant nonetheless. We live in an age where the mind, doctrine and theology are scorned. We are to supposedly feel our way forward by inward impulses given to us by the Holy Spirit. This is not Paul's implication however. In fact in the whole area of suffering knowledge is certain where feelings can deceive. When we are being persecuted for following Christ, or if we are being disciplined by our Father for growth in our character, or if we are feeling guilty because we have recently sinned and the devil is speaking doubt into our minds, it is knowledge not feeling that will help us. Ironically inward impressions are just another form of sight and not the faith that we are to live by.

Paul does not build our certainty on the external visible blessing of God that we are rich or have healthy bodies. Nor does he talk about having overwhelming spiritual impressions which give us a sense of security. Neither of these have to do with knowing but with feeling. They have to do with evidences but Paul is talking about truth that is not read off the surface of our circumstances or feelings. I feel I have to emphasize this point because there is a pseudo-spirituality that despises knowledge for experience as if doctrine, truth and teaching were somehow less spiritual less trustworthy and to be despised. The irony is that when we live our lives dependent upon impressions we end up putting our intuition in the place of God and not placing ourselves upon the sure revelation of God but upon uncertain impressions. That which is thought to be more sure than the Bible's truth is placed above the bible. And when this happens we have lost the most sure foothold that we have in this life, the Word of God.

Knowing God's character not His ways

The next thing we need to consider is what we are to know. And here Paul confronts us with a picture of God, the picture of how God interacts and controls His universe, that He is a God who is in control of all things, and is able to cause every detail of our lives, and even the bad things to serve His purpose. He is not a God who sits idle, He is not a God who sits helpless, He is the God who rules all things, and is guiding all things to serve His purposes. He is the God that Nebuchadnezzar had to realize was the true King of earth, Daniel 4:34-5, 'At the end of the days I, Nebuchadnezzar, lifted my eyes to heaven, and my reason

returned to me, and I blessed the Most High, and praised and honored him who lives forever, for his dominion is an everlasting dominion, and his kingdom endures from generation to generation; all the inhabitants of the earth are accounted as nothing, and he does according to his will among the host of heaven and among the inhabitants of the earth; and none can stay his hand or say to him, "What have you done?"

Christians are supposed to know this God who is not in heaven ringing His hands wishing that things would be better but has no power to enact His wishes. We are supposed to see that the various events of this world, and even those that seem to threaten to snuff out the church are not beyond His strength to control. No we believe as the Bible teaches that works out all things according to His good will, that He not only created the universe but sustains it at every moment, that we are at all times dependent upon Him for life. We believe that history is not a horse that has bolted that God is trying to catch and make do His bidding, no God is in control of all things including the evil, calamity and sin. He is not only in control but guiding all things to serve His purposes, namely His glory and our salvation. We will consider more on this later.

As Christians who feel the suffering and the groaning we may not have a total understanding of all that we suffer, but we know who controls all things and that He is able to make His plan come to pass. This I believe to be one of the most important lessons any Christian can ever learn, I feel that in teaching you this I have equipped you with one of the most important ways to think. When we wrestle with suffering, and the why of pain; when we seek to understand why a child dies, or a catastrophe strikes; when we try to understand why we are suffering in paralysing ways, this is the way of thinking that every Christian needs to know. We don't always know the why, but we do know the Who. We are not given insight into the secret councils of God, but God in His mercy has given us insights into His character and purposes. We may not know why certain things happen but we can know the character and purpose of the one who is in control of any events in my life. This is how Paul directs our thinking in this verse. He has been speaking about the suffering of this life as a Christian. And when he brings us to the point of comforting us he does not give us a long list of reasons why God does or allows things, simply that He is the one who is strong to do what He wants, and in our case He wants to save us. In this way of thinking we are not being called to peace through a close rationalization, through a careful explanation that accounts for all the possible questions that could arise, instead Paul cuts through to the bottom line, a universal truth that applies in every Christian's life no matter the individual situation. God is working out His purposes, He is working for our good, and He is able to finish what He started and to realise what He wants. Our comfort then does not come from all our whys being answered but rather in the knowledge of our loving almighty Father working His perfect might in our behalf. The knowledge is not an all knowing knowledge that can explain every detail, but the knowledge of God's character and power applied in pursuing His good plan for us. This is the one big answer which answers better than having all the little ones.

Knowing God's good purposes

So Paul directs us not to all the possible explanations behind God's actions in controlling our lives, instead he points us to who God is. Another basic fact that he points out which is better for us to know that all the specifics of all our suffering is the end to which God intends all things to happen. 'We know... all things work together for good.' He does not go through all the steps of the process but gives us the bottom line. He does not say, well A causes B which gives rise to C, and then C and D bring about E. Not he just says, God is bringing about Z, a good and glorious end. This is often the sort of information we want from God, we want an accounting for how every pain, every sacrifice, every action, word and thought works together to play a part in God's plan. Let me say that this sort of information may satisfy your curiosity but it is not essential to an assurance of your salvation, and a confident joy and hope that you will certainly be saved. Paul has given us enough to give us a sense of certainty, but God does not have to give you a blow by blow accounting for all that happens to you. In a democracy you may expect to have every tax dollar accounted for, but God has not been voted in by us, we are not in a democracy but a theocracy. God reveals all that we need to know, and in this instance we are told of the happy ending that God is working toward. We are reminded of the inevitable victory.

The 'good' that Paul speaks about is primarily the glory that he has spoken about since v17, and he speaks about God's purpose to glorify us again in v30. However we are also told about other good that God brings from our suffering. Our sufferings work for us an exceeding weight of glory, they purify our faith, they grow our character and increase our hope. Our sufferings in the Father's hands turn from random pain events into beneficial discipline. From His hand they are controlled to bring about good, the good of our holiness. I love this teaching of God turning all things for our good. It reminds me that God frustrates the purposes of the devil and takes all that the devil throws at us and turns it against him. I like to see our trials and persecutions in this fallen world as atomic missiles that the devil throws at the church. God intercepts those missiles, He takes the atomic material and He builds nuclear power stations out of them. Those power stations power our hospitals which heal us so that we can carry on fighting against the devil. They give power to our efforts by powering our gyms where we train to get stronger to work against him. They power our vehicles which carry us to war against him. God causes all that the devil intended, our destruction, to be reversed and instead our trials are like medicine not poison, they strengthen us not weaken us, they build up not destroy. Even death can no longer kill us for we go to Christ. This overwhelming power worked by God for our God explains why Paul talks about us being 'more than conquerors' through Christ.

The story of Joseph is a well known illustration of this principle of God turning negative events into great victories. We know how Joseph was sold into slavery by his jealous brothers, and how he spent 13 of his 30 years in prison or as a slave. In time God worked out a purpose that not only rescued Joseph but caused many to be saved from famine as well. After Jacob died Joseph's brothers were worried that Joseph would now exact his revenge, but Joseph we see was informed by the knowledge that Paul is talking about, he was able to be at peace with his situation because He knew His God and to what end He

was working, Gen. 50:20, '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. 21 So do not fear; I will provide for you and your little ones.' Thus he comforted them and spoke kindly to them.' We see that this knowledge not only enabled him to find peace but to treat his antagonists with kindness. Knowing our God and His purpose enables this behaviour. So when we find ourselves in those difficult situations and surrounded by pain and the reason is not apparent, we can comfort ourselves in the knowledge of God's power and God's good purposes.

An important qualification needs to be made. Too often when these verses like Rom. 8:28 and Gen. 50:20 have been used to comfort people, they have too often been applied to unbelievers. There is the false notion that things will just turn out right for everyone, that God is everyone's friend and just wants everyone to be happy. Just watch any movie or sitcom, when things go bad, you hear those empty platitudes, 'don't worry everything will be fine.' 'Everything will turn out right' is an ungrounded certainty, it is wishful thinking. Paul clearly tells us that 'for those who love God all things work together for good.' God is working out the salvation of those who love Him. He is guiding the paths of His children to glory not of everyone in the world. Suffering is medicine to those who are His and are being sanctified by His Spirit not everyone in the world. Not everyone in the world can claim a benevolent providence but only those who love God, those who are born again Christians and have trusted in Christ.

It must be stressed that this is a description of a Christian not a prescription for blessing. Paul is not saying that only those who are loving to God get the good spoken of here, as if some Christians who were being bad would not see the good promised. Paul is not giving us a condition but a description of Christians in general. All Christians love God, if they do not love God then they are not born again and cannot be Christians.

This particular description of a Christian is a rare one in Paul. Paul is more inclined to speak of Christians as those who are loved than those who love. There are only a few instances of Christians being described by Paul in this fashion, we see it in 1 Cor. 2:9, 8:3 and Eph. 6:24. Most of Paul's references to Christians emphasize what God has done in saving us not we can do for Him. Paul speaks about us being beloved, or called to be saints, or children of God. It is still appropriate however to describe the Christian as one who loves God. Christ summarised the law in terms of those who love God and their neighbours. We are to love God with all of our heart, soul, mind and strength. Christ indicates that this love is manifested in us obeying God's commands, and especially in loving the brethren and not loving the world. We should stress in the context of suffering that Christians are those who love God even when they suffer. Lloyd-Jones points out that in the parable of the sower it is those who do not love God who leave the faith when they are persecuted. Or in the case of Job, Job was willing to receive calamity as well as good from God, and even though God slay him he would continue to love and worship God. Those who claim to be Christians but start attacking God when the suffering starts, these are not Christians because they do not love God as Paul here describes.

Let us summarise what we have said so far. There is much we still need to say but we have already begun to glean immense comfort from Paul's words. Paul has spoken to suffering Christians and reminded them of certain types of knowledge that bring comfort. We know based on God's word not feeling. We know God's character although we don't have all His reasoning. We know His purposes as good although the face of our circumstances do not appear to be. We have all that we need in order to know that heaven is certain and we can rejoice in our trials. But we have also said that it is only those who love God who can have this comfort. Are you a Christian? Have you trusted in Christ for salvation? Have you experienced the miracle of regeneration and cast off your sins and followed God?