

Romans 8:26-39

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Date: 08 November 2020

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[0 : 00] Let's turn back to the chapter that we read, Romans chapter 8, and we're going to read from verse 29.

For those, well, we'll read from verse 28, 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.

And then 29 is the verse I'd like us to think about, 29 and 30, in fact. For those God foreknew, He also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of His Son, that He might be the firstborn among many brothers.

And those He predestined, He also called. Those He called, He also justified. And those He justified, He also glorified.

Those of you who have been following Jesus for many years will know what the word testimony means when we use it in church circles.

[1 : 09] A testimony is when someone tells the story of how they came to faith in Jesus Christ, the circumstances in their lives by which they came to faith in Jesus.

Two weeks ago, the preacher was Clive Bailey. You'll remember how he very movingly told of how he came to faith in this very congregation.

And for that reason, this very congregation meant a huge amount to him. Because it was, as he said, almost 50 years to the day that he stepped into church on the invitation of a fellow student for the first time, he heard the gospel and he came to faith in Jesus.

And I'm sure that you, like I, was, we were touched by that. The fact that 50 years to the day. That was his testimony. And when we give our testimony, I don't know if you've ever given your testimony, but when you do so, you do it very much from our perspective.

Well, I was born and I was raised in this place and here are my parents and these are my circumstances. And this is what I was like before I came to faith.

[2 : 24] And here is how I came to faith. It could have been through, like Clive, it could have been through a sermon. Or it could have been through a conversation that you had with a friend who is a Christian.

Or it could have been by just reading the Bible. I shouldn't say just reading the Bible. Many people have come to faith by reading the Bible or a Christian book or some other way in which God took hold of you and brought you to faith in Jesus Christ.

And usually when somebody gives their testimony, they'll tell you the story of how you were brought to faith and what you are like now. But we're not able to say anything else, are we?

Because we don't know what the future, well, we actually do know what the future is. But we don't know exactly what's around the corner. So all we can do is to say, here's what God's done in my life so far.

Now, this verse tells exactly the same story. Except it's from God's perspective.

[3 : 36] When we give our testimony, it's from our perspective. We tell our story. But here is God telling our story from how he sees things.

Everyone's testimony is different. Some people have a dramatic testimony. Some people, they can think back to a time in their lives where they had absolutely no thought of the gospel.

In fact, they hated everything that the Bible stood for. But now they have, he's a changed man. He's a changed woman. And all because of that conversation or that Bible reading or that sermon that they heard, whatever.

Remember, everyone's testimony is different. If I was to ask you this morning to each one individually tell what God has done in your life, you would all have a slightly different story. But from God's perspective, verse 29 tells us it is the same story.

Furthermore, like I say, we're only able to say what God's done in our lives up until this present moment. But when God tells the story, he's able to say what's going to happen in the future for all of us who belong to Jesus.

[4 : 50] And what a different story it is from his perspective. When we are giving our testimony, we start when we were young. But when God is giving our testimony, God starts before the world was ever created.

So then, let's look at how God tells our story. Let's look at what he has to say about not only how we came to know Jesus, but what he is currently doing in us and what he one day promises to do.

Romans 8, of course, is the great go-to chapter for every Christian, isn't it? It's the one place you go back to time and time again, no matter what you're going through.

You go to it when you're rejoicing. You go to it when you're sad. You go to it when you're in trouble. Because it's that chapter, isn't it, that seems to encapsulate the foundational truths in such a reassuring manner.

It starts off by assuring us in no uncertain terms that there is no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus. And as you go through the chapter, it is one encouragement after another reminds us that we are indwelt by the Holy Spirit, who takes even what we cannot construe as prayer and translates it into, even our groanings, translates it into a perfect plea before God.

[6 : 34] It tells us that the Spirit helps us in our weakness. It tells us that we know that in all things, in all things, God works for the good of those who love Him, who have been called according to our purpose.

I can't think, and you'll agree with me, I can't think of a more encouraging chapter in all of the Bible. It's the place we go to time and time again, isn't it?

But here is where God reminds us of the very foundation of who we are as His people. And when He comes to tell our story, He begins not when we were born, but way before that, even before the universe came into existence.

So we begin by the truth that our story is founded not in the day that we came to faith, but the moment when God chose us in Jesus Christ.

This is one of the verses in the New Testament that tells us in no uncertain terms that our salvation, our position in Jesus, our security in the Lord Jesus Christ rests in a moment before time began.

[7 : 59] We can't even imagine what that's like. But before time began. But before time began. In eternity. We don't know what that means. But in eternity, before the universe was created, that God knew who we were.

Every one of us is a planned human being. You are not some accident that has come into random being.

God knew who we were. God knew who we were. Millions and billions and trillions of years and before time began. He knew exactly who we were.

And He chose those who were going to be His people. Now let's stop there for a moment because I know what some of you are thinking.

You're thinking, well, hold on a minute. This is one of these passages. This is one of these things that you're going to have to qualify that. You're going to have to qualify it because surely, you know, that raises so many questions in my mind that I'm not sure if you're just going to be able to skip over there.

[9 : 05] Stop for a moment. Okay, let's stop. I'm not going to qualify it because the Bible doesn't qualify it. It is a plain fact.

It doesn't even try to qualify it. And this is not the only place where the Bible tells us that God's people have been chosen. We are God's people because we were chosen before the foundation of the world.

Let me go to another passage just to reinforce what I've just said. Ephesians chapter 1. Where Paul, the same writer, Paul, in Ephesians chapter 1, he says in verse 4, And it's not just Paul that says it.

The Lord Jesus Christ says it as well in John chapter 6, where he says, All that the Father has given to me will come to me.

So, I know what you're thinking. Because I've gone through this myself.

[10 : 26] As has every thinking Christian. How does that relate to those other passages of the Bible where we're told to go into the world and to offer to everyone, man, woman, child, the gospel,

such that if they believe, they will be saved.

How do these two things come together? They just do. I'm not asking us to understand it. None of us do understand it. Some people have been trying to understand this for centuries. Greater minds than us have tried to wrestle with this.

These are two strands in the gospel that appear to be contradictory but aren't. They have to be accepted together.

Because both are true. On the one hand, God has chosen his people before time began. He chose us. He knew us. This verse says he loved us even before we came into being.

[11:38] He loved us and he chose us. On the other hand, Jesus tells his disciples, go into the world and make disciples of all nations.

The gospel also tells us that for God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son so that whosoever believes in him should not perish and have everlasting life.

It also tells us, it goes as far as this. In 1 Timothy and chapter 2, Timothy says this, I urge then, first of all, that requests, prayers, intercession, and thanksgiving be made for everyone.

For kings and those in authority, we may live good and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness. Now listen to this. This is good and pleases God our Savior who wants all men and women to be saved and come to a knowledge of the truth.

How can these two things be together? How can these things, how can they correlate? They do. They do. And every time that Paul mentions what we call predestination, that's what we call it in the theological world, predestination, this moment when God chose those who were going to be his, Paul is not skeptical about it.

[13:12] He rejoices in it. There's not a single note of doubt or skepticism in this chapter. This chapter is full of rejoicing. He's thankful to God that he is amongst those who are chosen.

In Ephesians, he rejoices. Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ who has blessed us in the heavenly realms for he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight.

So, how does that, what does that mean then in terms of, does that mean that, well, if I'm going to be saved, I'm going to be saved? I mean, does it lead to arrogance on my part?

John Stott in his great commentary on Romans, he lists all of the possible, possible wrong reactions to this great truth. One of them is arrogance.

Well, if I'm going to be saved, I'm going to be saved. A sort of an arrogance that says, well, I'm amongst the elite and you're not. That's not the way it works at all. In fact, it's the opposite.

[14:20] When Paul thinks of his salvation, he is filled with humility because he knows that he doesn't deserve to be saved. Does it give us uncertainty?

Well, does it mean that I go through my whole Christian life thinking, well, I wonder if I really am chosen? Maybe I'm not. And at these times of temptation, maybe backsliding, you might feel, well, maybe I'm not chosen after all.

Maybe I'm not. Well, the way to prove that is to return to God, is to come back to him like the prodigal son, knowing that we have a father in heaven who welcomes his wayward children back into his arms.

Should it live to, should it mean complacency in the way that we live our lives? Does it matter how I live my life? Because if I'm chosen, I'm chosen.

If I'm elect, I'm elect. If I'm predestined, I'm predestined. Well, who cares about the way I live my life? That's not the way it works either. Because if I am chosen, then I am also chosen, and we'll see this in a few moments, I'm also chosen not just to come to faith in Jesus, but to live out the Christian life.

[15:36] So it will not make me complacent. But let me just come back at you if you doubt this truth. Because for some people, the difficulty they have, well, they say, well, does it not mean, could another meaning of this verse not be that somewhere before time began that God, yes, you're right in saying that he knew who we would all be.

That's fine. I'm okay with that, that he knew everything that was to take place in the future. I'm okay with that. But could it not be that God somehow foresaw what was going to happen, and he foresaw which one of us would listen to the gospel and accept Jesus, and on that basis, he chose us.

Do you understand what I mean? Do you understand that? That somehow that God, it wasn't as much as selecting those who were going to be his, but it was more like God foresaw because he's

the ultimate prophet, isn't he?

He knows all things that are going to happen in the future. So he knew who was going to listen to the gospel and who was going to respond to the gospel positively and accept Jesus. And on that basis, he chose them.

Is that what you think? If it is, let me tell you the problem with what you're saying. There are several problems.

[17 : 09] First of all, that assumes that a man or a woman is capable by himself or herself of believing in Jesus. We're not.

The Bible says we are dead in trespasses and sins, and a dead person cannot choose Jesus. Do you remember the great example of somebody coming to faith in Jesus?

Lazarus. John chapter 11. It's not only a great miracle, but it is also a great example of what happens in the life of a man or a woman when they come to faith.

Remember what happened? Lazarus had been dead for four days. Jesus went to the tomb, and he said, Lazarus, come out. And a miracle took place where the dead man, the man who had been dead for four days, he walked out because Jesus had brought him to life again.

That's what happens every time someone comes to faith in Jesus Christ. It's not a choice that you make. It is God raising you from the dead because that's what he had to do because we were dead and had to be raised to life again.

[18 : 40] And a dead person can't make any choice. So that's the first problem with your argument. Second problem with your argument is this. What if nobody chose Jesus?

If what you're saying is that it's all up to me to choose Jesus or not, then it could have been that Jesus died for no reason whatsoever because it could have been that nobody would decide to choose.

Third problem with your argument is that it puts salvation into your court and makes you responsible for your own salvation rather than God. Lord, is there anyone here this morning who can say to God, Lord, thank you for saving me, but actually I chose you.

Because if I chose you, then you didn't save me at all. It was me that did it. I believed. And that's not the way it works, is it?

Rather, we come this morning worshiping God, thanking him for rescuing us, for bringing us to life again, for coming in.

[20 : 01] What is it that Jesus himself says? For the Son of Man came into the world to seek and to save those who were lost.

What's the great image that Jesus gives his disciples in Luke about the lost sheep?

Remember what happened? The lost sheep went wandering away. What did the shepherd do? Left the 99 in the wilderness and off he went on his journey. He didn't say to the sheep, he didn't find the sheep and he says to the sheep, well, if you want to come back, that's okay, but if you want to stay where you are, that's okay.

No, he didn't. He lifted the sheep up and he put the sheep on his shoulders and he went home rejoicing. That's the picture that the gospel, that Jesus gives, the gospel, the Son of Man came to seek and to save.

In other words, Jesus did not come just to make salvation available. He came to save. Now, that's one side of the story. Equally, no less, is the other side in which Jesus sent out his disciples to make disciples of all nations and they were to do so by freely, unconditionally offering Jesus to everyone who would listen.

[21 : 29] That's what happens in Acts of the Apostles where the disciples went and it didn't matter, they were prepared to give their lives for this. And they preached Jesus, the reason that Jesus came into the world, the reason why he died on the cross and his resurrection and they invited everyone, all and sundry, men, women, boys and girls, to come to faith in him so that whosoever believes and 2,000 years later I can, with all the authority of the word of God, I can say to you today, if you are not a Christian, don't say, oh well, if I'm not elect, I'm not elect, don't say that.

If you are not a Christian, then I am offering you what Jesus offers you, everlasting life, if you believe in him and come to faith in him.

It's the free offer of the gospel. gospel. Don't try and reconcile them, just rejoice that they're there, that both of these elements, they are, they are like parallel train tracks, if you like.

You never see train tracks, the idea with train tracks is that the train can't go if they come together. That would be absurd as long as they're separate, as long as they run alongside one another, then the train can run.

And here we have predestination and the free offer of the gospel, both of these are equally biblical truths and both of these we rejoice in.

[23 : 11] And the reason today you can pray confidently for your unconverted friend or relative is because God has the power to save. If he didn't, then there's no point in praying for them because it's up to them whether they come to faith in Jesus or not.

But what happened? What happens? Of course we want to pray for our unbelieving spouse or unbelieving brother or sister or cousin or friend or whatever, believing that God has the power. He is the power to save. Now I've spent too long on this but I do think it's important to hammer this home because it's in the Bible and I'm not going to ignore it just because it's a difficult verse and just because it raises all these questions and just because it leads to all kinds of wrong conclusions. We can't ignore it. When we come to a verse like this we want to wrestle with it and we want to try and understand it as best we can. So that's the first part of the story of God.

Let's just very quickly look at the rest. Why did he do this? Verse 29 again. So that we can be conformed to the likeness of his son.

[24 : 22] The purpose of his choosing his people is, here it is, so that we can be conformed to the likeness of his son and he doesn't stop there.

So that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. There are two things there and we'll just finish at 29. I was going to go into verse 30 but we don't have time. But let's think of this.

God's plan for all of his people including us this morning, here it is. I'm sure that you've often wrestled with the question what's God's plan for my life?

I certainly did when I was, especially when I was a young Christian and I was a student, you know, all that uncertainty awaiting, you don't know where you're going to live, you don't know who you're going to marry, you don't know what kind of job you're going to do and you're kind of thinking oh I wonder, I wonder, I wonder, and as a young Christian student, you know, you're thinking and I'm sure that this, by the way, I'm not ridiculing this at all, I went through this, you're praying and you're desperate to know what God's plan is for your life.

Have you prayed that? Good, I hope you have. You're quite right. Because God is on the throne and God does lead us and guide us.

[25 : 43] If I'd known what plan he had for my life, I'd have been utterly terrified if I'd known that at the time. But here, and the fact is that when we pray that prayer, when we pray Lord, Lord, we're actually what we're really saying to God is actually I would like to know, will you please show me?

He's not going to do that. But here is God's plan for every believer God's love. And if your focus is on this verse, then actually you don't need to worry about the rest.

The rest will just fall into place. Here it is. God's plan for all of us today, whether we're young or old, is to be conformed to the image, the likeness of his son.

And that applies whether you're gifted or not, whether you're an engineer or whether you're an accountant or whether you're a clerical person or whether you're a scientific person, it doesn't matter.

All of us, all of us are in the same boat here. His plan is that we be conformed to the likeness, that we, in other words, that we become day by day, slowly but surely, that we become more like Jesus.

[27 : 10] the reason why God's spirit dwells in us, he's there for a purpose, and the purpose is to shape us, to fashion us, to mold us, and the end result, the blueprint, the objective, the aim, the goal, is that we become like Jesus, not what he was like physically.

We don't know what he was like physically, that's not the point, it doesn't matter, but what he was like in his character. That's God's aim.

The question is, is it your aim? Is that your objective? Is it your purpose? Is it your aim? Is it your goal right now? Is it mine? I have to ask myself the same question.

To what extent am I being changed and am I allowing myself to be changed? To what extent do I really want to be changed to be more like Jesus?

When I look back over the last year, I have to ask myself, to what extent has my life been my character, my conduct, my patience, my humility, my behavior towards my wife, my children, my work colleagues?

[28 : 36] what I'm like inside? My prayerfulness, my love for the Bible. Can I really say what we're talking about with the children, that the Bible is sweeter than honey?

To what extent is that true? And is it becoming more true? Paul says this in Philipians, he says, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling.

And that's him saying exactly the same as what he said. Work out your own salvation. And then he goes on to say, for it is God that works in you to will and to do of his good pleasure.

And the work that God is doing in you and in me is conforming us, shaping us, fashioning us. It's like a sculptor. It's like a master sculptor.

Michelangelo is probably the most famous sculptor of all, isn't he? Even to this day, people marvel at his skill.

[29 : 46] They travel hundreds and thousands of miles just to see his works, hundreds of years old, and yet people are amazed. Michelangelo. I remember reading once, I'm going to finish with this.

I remember hearing once of a tour that went to a museum where there was a sculpture of Michelangelo there. There was a big crowd of tourists and they were being guided by this, I think he was an Italian or something or whatever.

And they're amazed at this and he's describing all about Michelangelo and his life and all the rest of it. And one of them asked a question, he says this, he says, how did he do it?

And the tour guide said this, oh he says that's straightforward, he just knocked off the bits he didn't like. And that's what God does, knocks off the bits that he doesn't like.

That's painful. Because what if the things that God doesn't like we do like? That's when it gets really painful doesn't it? Isn't it? But that's what God's determined to do.

[31 : 01] To conform us to the likeness of his son. Is it your prayer this morning that God will work every day in you to be conformed to the likeness of Jesus?

Do you want to be like Jesus? That's it. And if you're not a Christian this morning let me just go back and say one more time that Jesus came to bring salvation to the lost.

We were all by nature lost. None of us deserve God's mercy. Yet we heard the gospel and God drew us to himself.

And I really hope that God will draw you and that you will say yes as you come under his power and as you come to see his truth and as you come to believe in the Lord Jesus Christ.

So believe, trust, surrender to him and then see what God can do, the transformation he can make, the forgiveness that he can bring to you, the freedom that he can give you as his gift.

[32 : 27] Our Father in heaven, we pray that you will fulfill your purpose in all of us. We pray, Father, that you will keep us from being hung up on the difficulties that your word sometimes brings to us.

It is difficult to reconcile the free offer of the gospel with how you have chosen your people and yet there it is, black and white. We pray to accept it with gladness and with rejoicing.

We pray that it will be an incentive to us to pray for others and to work for the gospel and in support of the gospel.

So, Father, bless the rest of this day to us in Jesus' name. Amen.