

## God Is for Us

Romans 8:28-39

John Breon

At the heart of this passage is a great phrase: *God is for us*. Here's a four word summary of the Gospel, like *God sent his Son* in verse 3. *God is for us* is a concise definition of grace. It doesn't just mean that God has good feelings about us, but that God acts on our behalf in love and mercy. This gracious action of God for us is centered in Jesus Christ, who died, was raised to life, and is at God's right hand.

Now let's start at the beginning of the passage. Because God is for us, we are ***more than certain***. Verse 28 is widely quoted and often misunderstood. We sometimes hear someone quote just part of it: "all things work together for good." They usually mean something like, *things are not as bad as they seem* or *everything will work out in the end* or *everything happens for a reason*. But that's not what the verse is saying. That attitude confuses wishful thinking with Christian faith.

Let's hear the whole verse: "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." Our good is found in God's purpose. God's will really is our good.

Jim Moore is a United Methodist pastor from Texas. He tells about when he was in seminary, part of his training was to work as a hospital chaplain. One day, as he went to the nurses' station to see who needed a visit, the nurse told him about a woman who was scheduled for brain surgery. She was very ill and the surgery would be very delicate. But the worst thing was the woman's attitude. Her self-pity was making her depressed. Jim thought that he would go in, introduce himself and let her talk about how she was feeling. Maybe talking it out would make her feel better. And, he wouldn't have to say much because he didn't know what to say. But as he started down the hall, the nurse said, "Oh, her condition is so serious the doctors don't want her even to talk."

So Jim made his way to the room, nervous, wondering what to do. He bumbled and fumbled all through the visit. He opened the door too hard and it slammed against the wall. He walked over and accidentally kicked the

bed. He nervously spoke to the woman. He tried to pray, but even that came out in a stumbling, halting way.

A few days later, he was scheduled to be at the hospital again. He hurried to the third floor to check on this woman, wondering if she had made it through her surgery. The nurse said she was doing better than expected and her attitude had improved. Jim went to the woman's room and spoke with her. He asked what had made the difference for her. She said that she began feeling better after his visit. He couldn't believe that. He said, "But I made a mess of that visit." She said, "I know. But I felt sorry for you and that was the first time I thought about something other than myself and my problems and that's when my attitude began to change" (*Yes, Lord, I Have Sinned but I Have Several Excellent Excuses* 96-98).

God is able to bring good out of our failures and the bad things that happen in life.

Verse 28 is not a statement about life in general. It's a specific statement about God's people—those who love God and are called by God according to his purpose. Paul is not saying that all things are good. Some things are evil. Bad things do happen. But he is saying that for those who love God no evil may come to us that God can't use for our growth and God's glory. God works in all things—even horrible things, even things God didn't will—to accomplish God's eternal will. God is sovereign, he rules over all. God does not will all things, but God is at work in all things.

Some find it helpful to distinguish between God's perfect will and God's permissive will. God's perfect will is what he actually desires, what he wants to happen. God's permissive will is what he allows to happen. This includes even things that oppose God's perfect will such as sin and numerous evils. But God's perfect will is accomplished even through the things done that oppose it. God uses all things and works them into his ultimate purpose.

We see God's ultimate purpose in verses 29-30. God's purpose is his gracious design of saving a lost world by the death of his Son. Salvation is the result of God's eternal will. It doesn't just happen; it's not an accident. And God's purpose is revealed in Jesus Christ. The point of these verses is that God is not surprised. God knew all along what would be required for

salvation. God purposed all along to make a people who would be like his Son, Jesus.

The ideas of God's foreknowledge and predestination do not remove human responsibility. At the same time, they remind us that nothing we can do will detract from God's power and glory. The point is not that we are individually predetermined to come to faith or not. The point is that God knows and loves us in advance. God's plan is that all who are in Christ will be made like Christ. To make us like Jesus is God's purpose and to be like Jesus is our goal. This is the good for which God works in all things. It's the purpose according to which we are called.

Some time ago, a news magazine show on TV featured several people who had been introduced on the show earlier and then showed where they were at the present. There was a little boy who had suffered a severe head injury when he was a year old. He was now six and doing better than expected. One reporter spoke with a man he had interviewed four years before who was a drug addict. Now he was "clean," had a good job and had been reunited with his parents. Another story was about a homeless thirteen-year-old boy. He now lived in a foster home and had just graduated with honors from high school. These were just a few of the featured stories. At the end of the program, the anchor concluded, "F. Scott Fitzgerald said there are no second acts in American lives. As we've seen tonight, he was wrong."

As God's people in Christ, as people who love God and are called according to God's purpose, we find that there are second and third and fourth acts in our lives. God keeps working throughout our lives to bring us where he wants us to be, to make us what he intends, to accomplish his good purpose for us.

Our confidence rests not in our abilities or in our limited view of reality. We have certainty and confidence because of this revelation from God's perspective. We see the tapestry or embroidery of human life from the backside with all the knots and tattered ends. God sees it from the finished side of the pattern. Our challenge right now is to believe that by God's grace the knots and rough ends are actually weaving a pattern that is already known to God and which will be beautiful if intricate.

R. J. Thomas was a missionary to China in the middle of the nineteenth century. He had a heart for Korea, but Korea was a hermit kingdom. No foreigners were allowed in. So Thomas went to China instead and bided his time. In 1865 the opportunity Thomas had been waiting a lifetime for came along.

An American ship, the SS General Sherman, was going to steam up the Taedong River to the capital, Pyong Yang, in hopes of luring the Koreans into trade. Thomas bought a berth on the ship, hoping to meet some scholars in Pyong Yang who spoke Chinese, and took as many Chinese Scriptures with him as he could carry on board.

The trip was ill-fated. In a port on the way to the capital, some of the General Sherman's crew killed three Korean men in a barroom brawl. When they reached Pyong Yang, the rumors had grown to such an extent that it was impossible to come ashore. The people of Pyong Yang were convinced that the foreigners had come [to kidnap and kill their children]. There was nothing to do but turn around and head down the river.

But they got stuck on a sandbank. Seeing them stranded, the Korean defense lashed a series of small ships together, set them on fire, and they drifted to surround the General Sherman, which then caught on fire. Everyone on board had to leap into the river. As they waded to shore, they were killed by the waiting Koreans.

Thomas also waded to shore. Before he could speak, a club swung with murderous force [crushed his head], but his killer noticed he had not emerged with a [sword], but was [carrying] books. He picked up a couple of the sodden books. Drying them off, he separated the leaves and saw that they were nicely printed. He couldn't read but decided to paper the outside of his house with the pages, as was the custom at the time. Imagine his astonishment when he returned from his fields a few weeks later to find a [group] of scholars earnestly reading his walls. One of these scholars became a Christian by reading a Gospel portion plastered onto the wall. A generation later this scholar's

nephew assisted in the first translation of the New Testament into Korean.

R. J. Thomas never lived to see the fruit of his labor. He died, his life's purpose unfulfilled, his potential unrealized. For anyone aware of Thomas's death, his life was a mystery for years afterward. But his life was not in vain. (Ronald Boyd-MacMillan, *Faith that Endures* 313-14)

Thomas's story shows it is o.k. to die unaware of the meaning of our life. Your life purpose may remain a mystery to you, as may the events of your world, but that's o.k. God is in charge. We are relieved of the responsibility to understand everything and the need to change it. God takes the rejected things of the earth and builds his eternal kingdom from them. "The meaning of life does not consist in what we make of it, but in what God makes of it" (Boyd-MacMillan, cited by Darrell Cates, *Darrell's Drift*, email 9/29/10).

We can also see that because God is for us ***we are more than conquerors***. Paul starts preaching now. He gets into a rhythm. First he asks, "What can we say in response to God's purpose and God's power to carry it out in our lives?"

"If God is for us, who can be against us?" Of course, no one can. Though many things may oppose us, nothing and no one can stand against us if God is acting for us and working to fulfill his purpose in us.

"If God did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?" Of course he will. The cross shows the generosity of God. The cross represents both God's love and Christ's atoning sacrifice, so how can we doubt God's favor? If God paid the highest price (God's Son), why would he quibble about anything less? The cross is the assurance that God is for us in all things, especially what is necessary for salvation, both now and in the world to come.

"Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen?" No one, of course. Though Satan accuses us, though our own conscience may accuse us and doubt our standing with God, God is the one who justifies us. God has released us and put us right with himself.

“Who can condemn those whom God has forgiven?” No one, of course. Christ Jesus has died to forgive us—even more, he was raised to life and is at the right hand of God—interceding for us, representing us, speaking on our behalf. Just as God’s Spirit intercedes within us, God’s Son intercedes for us in glory. Only God or Christ has the right to condemn believers, but God has pledged at the cost of his Son’s life to preserve believers, not destroy us.

“Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?” No one, of course. Paul now suggests some of the things we might think could separate us from Christ’s love. Physical danger and hardship, including the loss of life (“sword”). Paul himself will perish by the sword in Rome within a decade of writing these words. Paul has also known more than his share of physical danger and hardship (see 2 Corinthians 11:23-29). Yet in the face of all these and all persecution, Paul confidently asserts, “In all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.”

Faith does not protect us from suffering. Sometimes faith is the occasion of our suffering. Richard Wurmbrand was speaking at ORU Chapel. He was a pastor in Romania when it was taken over by the Communists. Wurmbrand spent several years in prison, many of them in solitary confinement. Yet God saw him through terrible hardships. As I listened to him tell about being tortured and beaten, I realized that his faith did not keep him from suffering. It was because of his faith that he suffered all that. Paul’s own suffering of this kind was probably fresh in his memory as he wrote to the Romans.

We are conquerors *in* adversity and suffering. God sometimes delivers us from trouble, but often God takes us through it, letting us know that he is with us. Because God is with us, because God is for us, because God is working in everything for our good in God’s purpose, we are more than conquerors. Nothing can finally defeat us because all things serve God’s will for us.

“Conquerors” does not suggest a defensive stance. Conquerors are on the march. Jesus said the gates of hell shall not prevail against the church. Gates don’t attack, they resist attack. The people of God are storming the gates of hell. We follow our victorious Lord and we overcome in him.

Not only do we conquer in physical threats to faith, but no cosmic or supernatural power can separate us from God's love. Death itself can't separate us from God's love. When we are in Christ, death simply ushers us into his presence. All the troubles and temptations of life can't separate us from God's love. Supernatural beings are not strong enough to separate us from God's love. Time and space are not long enough or far enough to separate us from God's love.

Paul says that because of what God has done in Christ and because of his own experience of God's love, "I am utterly and unshakably convinced that nothing in all creation will be able to separate us from God's love in Christ Jesus our Lord."

In prisons and a Nazi concentration camp, Corrie ten Boom and her sister Betsie suffered terribly for their role in protecting Jews from the Nazis. At one point in that dark experience, as Betsie was placed in the hospital ward, she told Corrie, "We must tell people what we have learned here. We must tell them that there is no pit so deep that God is not deeper still. They will listen to us, Corrie, because we have been here" (*The Hiding Place* 217).

There was once a young man who, when he was four years old his mother died giving birth to a younger brother. His father didn't cope with the situation very well. This boy was now the second to youngest in a large family. His older brothers resented and abused him. They treated him horribly. But he got out of that situation. He worked hard and received promotions in his job. Then he was accused of sexual harassment. Though he was innocent, he went to jail for it.

Maybe you know the young man. His name was Joseph and his story is in the book of Genesis.

Joseph's life demonstrates what Paul talks about here in Romans. Joseph even says something to his brothers at the end that Paul's words here echo: "God turned into good what you meant for evil" (Gen. 50:20 NLT).

How did Joseph get to that place? After he was released from jail to interpret the king's dreams, he was made second in command over all of Egypt. He married and had two sons. The first he named Manasseh, which means "forget." He was able to forgive and get past what his brothers had

done. He named his second son Ephraim, which means "fruitful." God enabled him to live a new life, not bound by the past, but free and full.

God, through the Holy Spirit, is here now. God calls you. God wants to make you be like Jesus. God is at work in all things in your life to fulfill that purpose. God invites you to love him, trust him, and work with him in the confidence that nothing can separate you from God's love.