



# UNSHAKABLE FOUNDATIONS

SERIES: GUILT, GRACE, AND GLORY

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Romans 8:28-39

19th Message

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It is probably true to say that life has not turned out the way most of us imagined it would. Listen to what one ten-year-old said in his poem, "If I Were In Charge Of the World":

If I were in charge of the world  
I'd cancel oatmeal,  
Monday mornings,  
Allergy shots, and also  
Sara Steinberg

If I were in charge of the world  
There'd be brighter night lights,  
Healthier hamsters, and  
Basketball baskets forty-eight inches lower.

If I were in charge of the world  
You wouldn't have lonely.  
You wouldn't have clean.  
You wouldn't have bedtimes.  
Or "Don't punch your sister."  
You wouldn't even have sisters.

If I were in charge of the world  
A chocolate sundae with whipped cream and nuts  
would be a vegetable.  
All 007 movies would be a G.  
And a person who sometimes forgot to brush,  
And sometimes forgot to flush,  
Would still be allowed to be  
In charge of the world.<sup>1</sup>

But we are not in charge of the world. Much of the time we feel an unsettling sense of insecurity and paranoia, an awareness that we are not immune to mishaps and perils. Our lives are a tossed salad of tragedies and triumphs, profanity and purity, despair and hope.

Perhaps that is why many view history as a random succession of events devoid of any trace of divine purpose. John Stott said on one occasion, "Many see history as a set of tracks made by a drunken fly whose feet are wet with ink, staggering across a piece of white paper. History seems to have no purpose."

Scripture has a radically viewpoint, however. The Bible records the activity of God in and through history. God is good, and his plan is good. Our Christian faith is rooted in the integrity, character and faithfulness of almighty God.

If we didn't already know it, in our study in the opening verses of chapter 8 of Romans last week we learned that life is hard. Christians suffer, and even groan at times, but in the midst of our trials we are sustained by a certain hope—the hope of glory. And though that hope is still unseen and unrealized, it is sure, because it is grounded in the loyal-love of God.

The focus of this entire chapter is on the security of God's children. Today we will see that that security is based on the unalterable purpose of God, which itself is based on his eternal loyal-love. I find this passage greatly encouraging. I love to share it because it speaks directly to people's needs. Let us see what Paul has to say. Romans 8:28:

**And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose.** (Rom 8:28, NASB)

Here we come to one of the best-known verses in the entire Bible. It begins with the statement, *we know*. There are a lot of things that we don't know. Earlier in the chapter, for instance, Paul said that we don't know what to pray for. In fact, for much of our Christian life we are caught in the tension between what we know and what we don't know. While there are many areas that we ought to be agnostic about, because God hasn't plainly revealed his mind, here we find unshakeable truths about his providential care—which *we know*.

Notice that Paul does not say that all things are good. Cancer is not good. Broken marriages are not good. The apostle is saying that in all these things, however, God is working for our good, not necessarily our temporal good, but our eternal good. The good thing that God is doing is producing glory in our lives, moving us along to that awesome state that he has envisioned for us. God takes everything, all of our suffering and groanings, even our sin, and these become the tools in his hand to produce good.

Notice that Paul isn't expressing a general, superficial optimism that everything tends to work towards everyone's good in the end. John Stott writes, "The good which is God's objective is our completed salvation; and the beneficiaries are his children, who are described as 'those who love him, those who are called according to his purpose.'"<sup>2</sup>

God has a purpose. We don't always know what he is doing, and we don't like it all the time, but we do know

that in all things he is working for our supreme and eternal good. We see that throughout Scripture. Joseph's brothers threw him in a pit, and then sold him as a slave in Egypt. There he was falsely accused of rape, and imprisoned. But God miraculously rescued him and installed him as the second in command of all Egypt—because the Lord was with him. God put Joseph in that place to equip Pharaoh and his nation to supply food to the world during a seven-year famine, which Joseph had foretold. Years later, during the terrible famine, Joseph again met his brothers. In his famous words in Genesis 50:20 he captured the whole tale of their treachery: "As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good in order to bring about this present result, to preserve many people alive."

Oftentimes there are two different intentions, the human and the divine, behind the events in our lives: the human intention, "you meant it for evil"; and the divine intention, "but God meant it for good." These describe the same historical event, but it could be ascribed in two different ways: to the evil of men (who will be held accountable for their actions, as was the case with Joseph's brothers), or to the goodness of God's providence, because human beings and God were behind the same events and God overruled evil for good.

Remember Jeremiah's words to the Jews who were in exile in Babylon after the catastrophic destruction of Jerusalem. Speaking in God's name, he wrote, "For I know the plans I have for you," declares the LORD, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future." (Jer 29:11) And maybe the clearest event in history involving both human evil and the divine plan is the cross, which Peter attributed both to human wickedness and the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God (Acts 2:23).

Paul now goes on to spell out God's good purpose.

**For whom He foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the first-born among many brethren; and whom He predestined, these He also called; and whom He called, these He also justified; and whom He justified, these He also glorified.** (Rom 8:29-30)

These difficult verses, involving sovereignty and free will, election and choice, are hard to understand. I propose to leave these issues for chapter 9 of Paul's letter; there we will come face to face with them. So for the moment I don't want to talk about the logical tension between these concepts. If we do, we will miss the point the apostle is making, because he is trying to comfort us. In these verses Paul is revealing how God gets us from A to Z, from an unregenerate, ungodly state to the glorious being he has purposed we become. He traces God's good purpose through five stages, beginning in God's own mind and consummating in glory.

Everything begins with God's foreknowledge. Some people think "foreknowledge" means that God knew those who would choose him, and on that basis he

chose them. But no, it doesn't mean that at all. It can't possibly mean that. That would mean that God's decision is based on our decision. If that were the case, we would be running the universe. Our salvation would be based on our merit, not God's mercy. In any event, that isn't what the word means. The word "know" expresses much more than intellectual awareness; it speaks of a personal relationship of affection. The word is used in the Old Testament to refer to sexual intercourse, the most intimate of all relationships: "Adam knew his wife Eve, and she conceived and bore a child" (Gen 4:1), God looked down through eternity, before you were born, and he had a loving relationship with you. He already chose you to be one upon whom he had bestowed his love.

And those whom he "foreknew" he "predestined." That word means "to decide upon beforehand," or "to mark out with a boundary beforehand." Just as a new house is first marked out by stakes to define where the foundation should be laid, so our character and life is marked out with a predetermined boundary line. God already knew what our character would be like, having perfected it in his first-born Son. His purpose is to conform us to Christ's character by teaching us to let the Spirit live out in us the life of Jesus Christ. So it's a sure thing. One of these days we will have a body like Jesus and a spirit and soul like his, free from evil.

Paul goes on to say that those whom God predestined, he also "called." This is where we get into the action. Up to this point the passage has been concerned with God's mind and purpose, but now we become involved in the picture. We can't begin to describe the mystery and wonder that is involved in this as the Holy Spirit starts to work in our lives. We may be far removed from God; we may have grown up in a non-Christian family; we may be involved in a totally non-Christian faith, or we may be from a Christian home; it doesn't make any difference. God begins to draw us to himself. He brings us to the place where we hear the good news and we respond in faith. And "whom he called, these he also justified." As we have learned in studying this letter, this term means far more than mere forgiveness of our sins. It is a declaration that we sinners are now righteous in God's sight.

And finally, when history is over and time is no more, we will be glorified. Paul writes: "whom He justified, these He also glorified." He puts that future event in the past tense, because it is certain

The point that the apostle is making here assures us that no one will get lost in this whole process, no one will fall through the cracks, because God is responsible for it. It is going to involve pain and toil, death and tears, disappointment, bereavement, sorrow, sin, stumbling, failure, falling, forgiveness, all these things, but it is going to happen, because what God sets out to do, he accomplishes, no matter what it takes.

What is our response to all of this? Verse 31:

## What then shall we say to these things?

"In light of what I have just written," asks the apostle, "what is left to say?" What can we add? His response is to ask five more questions, challenging anyone to answer them and disagree with the truth they contain. But there is no answer, because nothing or no one can harm God's children.

### If God is for us, who is against us? (Rom 8:31)

If Paul had simply asked, "Who is against us?" immediately we would be flooded with answers. Indwelling sin nags us. The unbelieving world persecutes us. Tragedy keeps striking us. But that isn't the naïve question which the apostle poses. He asks, "If [or, better translated, *Since*] *God is for us, who is against us?*"

Four words that dominate that verse deserve our attention: *God is for us*.

*God is for you*. Your parents may have abused you; your teachers may have misunderstood you; your boss may not like you; your friends may be ashamed of you, but God, the Creator of the universe, is for you.

*God is for you*. Today, this very moment, while you are sitting in this room, he is for you. He couldn't be any closer than he is right now. There is nothing you can do to increase or take away from his loyal-love.

*God is for you*. He likes you. He is on your side. He is cheering for you.

*God is for you*. This isn't a blanket promise for all of humanity. Everyone cannot make this claim; only those who have been justified in Christ can do so.

It doesn't make any difference who is against us. The important thing is that God is for us. But how do we know that? As we look at events of the day disasters seem to keep coming with tragic regularity. But Paul tells us how we can know.

He asks another question in verse 32:

### **He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how will He not also with Him freely give us all things? (Rom 8:32)**

The cross demonstrates that God loves us. We cannot look at creation and come to that conclusion. There is only one event in history that establishes that fact, and that is the crucifixion. The cross is where he revealed his love for us.

The apostle is arguing from the greater to the lesser. Since God has already given us the costliest gift of all, the gift of his own Son, will he not now provide us with everything we need? In giving his Son he gave everything. The cross is the guarantee of his loyal-love, his never-ending generosity. But we still worry. We worry about our IRA's and SAT's. We worry that we don't have enough money; and when we have enough money, we worry about how we should manage it. But we already have everything.

Next, Paul asks two questions about guilt and grace. Verses 33-34:

### **Who will bring a charge against God's elect? God is the one who justifies; who is the one who condemns? Christ Jesus is He who died, yes, rather who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who also intercedes for us. (Rom 8:33-34)**

Can anyone bring a charge against us that will cause God to reverse his decree of righteousness? No! Paul's point is that no prosecution could ever succeed since God, our judge, has justified us. We can never be condemned because Jesus Christ, our Advocate, has died for our sins. He was raised from the dead and is seated at God's right hand and is interceding for us. So who will accuse us?

If that question stood by itself, we would be flooded with voices. Our conscience accuses us. The devil never ceases to accuse us. Even his name, *diabolos*, means, "slanderer." In the book of Revelation he is called "the accuser of the brethren, who accuses them day and night before our God." If that were not enough, all of us have human enemies who delight in pointing accusing fingers at us. But the apostle's point is that none of the charges will be sustained. All the accusations will fall to the ground like arrows off a shield.

Maybe Paul was reminded of the words of the Servant in Isaiah:

### **He who vindicates me is near. Who then will bring charges against me?**

**Let us face each other! Who is my accuser?**

**Let him confront me!**

**It is the Sovereign LORD who helps me.**

**Who is he that will condemn me? (Isaiah 50:8-9)**

Once the judge has released us we need not fear the court. We can confidently challenge the universe with all its inhabitants, human and demonic. *Who is the one who condemns?* No one.

And so the final question, concerning endurance. Verse 35:

### **Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?**

This is the bottom-line question, the one that Paul has been trying to get us to see with all of the other questions. This is what everyone wants to know: How long will God's love endure? Can anything stop God from loving us? Paul looks around for answers, and lists seven possibilities:

**Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution** [ all the strains and stresses that come with living in this hostile world], **or famine, or nakedness** [lack of adequate food or clothing], **or peril, or sword?** [the risk of death or the experience of it] **Just as it is written, "For Thy sake we are being put to death all day long; we were considered as sheep to be slaughtered."** (Rom 8:35-36)

Paul says that every day we endure circumstances over which we have no control. We are considered as sheep to be slaughtered. We feel pain, misery and loss, circumstances that are hard to bear and which challenge our faith. Nevertheless, our suffering does not alienate us from Christ; it is evidence of our union with the one who was crucified.

Verses 37-39:

**But in all these things we overwhelmingly conquer through Him who loved us.**

We not only endure them, we triumph over them.

**For I am convinced** [Paul began with, *I know*; here he ends more personally, saying, *I am convinced*] **that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.** (Rom 8:37-39)

The apostle began by asking whether anything will separate us from Christ's love. Now he knows that nothing can, so nothing will. Nothing, absolutely nothing, can separate us from the love of God. What an unshakable foundation that is!

Ruth Harms Calkins summarizes this passage with this poem from her book, *Tell Me Again, Lord, I Forget*:

God  
I may fall flat on my face  
I may fail until I feel  
Old and beaten and done in  
Yet your love for me is changeless.  
All the music may go out of my life  
My private world may shatter to dust  
Even so You will hold me  
In the palm of Your steady hand.  
No turn in the affairs  
Of my fractured life  
Can baffle You.  
Satan with all his braggadocio  
Cannot distract You.  
Nothing can separate me  
From Your measureless love:  
Pain can't  
Disappointment can't  
Anguish can't.  
Yesterday, today, tomorrow can't.  
The loss of my dearest love can't.  
Death can't  
Life can't.  
Riots war insanity unidentity  
Hunger neurosis disease -  
None of these things  
Nor all of them heaped together  
Can budge the fact  
That I am dearly loved.  
Completely forgiven  
And forever free  
Through Jesus Christ  
Your Beloved Son.<sup>3</sup>

1. Judith Viorst, *If I Were in Charge of the World and Other Worries* (Aladdin, 1984).

2. John R.W. Stott, *Romans* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1994) 248.

3. Ruth Harms Calkins (Wheaton: Tyndale, 1986) 150-151.

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