

January 15, 2017

Ephesians 1:1-14 / II Thess. 2:13-17 / Romans 8:28-29

Predestination and the Ultimate Good God Works for in All Things

Before I begin my message for this morning, I need to warn you that starting today and going through the end of chap. 11, Paul will speak of a truth, or Gospel doctrine, that unsettles some people, makes others nervous, and confuses (or even scares) still others. And I say that after years of seeing it.

People in general love v. 28, but they get nervous when Paul adds v. 29 to it – which actually completes the promise of v. 28. That is, they love the first half of the promise in v. 28, but balk at v. 29, which tells us our assurance it can be true is somehow predicated on the ever-controversial issue of “predestination.”

As one who refuses to side-step the issue, I could tell you story, after story, after story, from my church in Westport, my church in Honduras, and even here at CCBC. For in each church I have gone through Romans – either from the pulpit or at a mid-week Bible Study. And when I come to these verses, and read them, there always someone who reacts very strongly to this truth – *and often toward me for sharing it* – especially when they asked if I believed it was true and I said, “Yes.”

One lady (raised in a Baptist Church most of her 70 years) stormed out the front door of her own house (where we were holding the Bible Study) telling me after she cooled down and returned that at no time in the many years in her church had she ever even heard the pastor mention the word. Not in a class, or a sermon, or a discussion. In fact, she thought I was teaching heresy! So she actually called her pastor in the States and asked him if what I was saying was true. “Yes,” he told her, he believed it was. “*Then why haven’t you ever taught us about it?*” she asked.

“Because it would divide the church,” he said.

His answer is the same one I've heard from other pastors. They avoid speaking of a prominent and frequently repeated truth of Scripture because it might be, "controversial."

Yet, let me say that unsettling as it may be for some, confronting you with things you may never have heard or considered before, you have to know every N.T. author except James speaks of it. Jesus speaks of it. Paul speaks of it. Peter speaks of it. Matthew, Mark, Luke and especially John – all speak of it! Jude and the author of Hebrews allude to it as well. James alone does not.

In fact, as one man here at this church once told me (one who was initially skeptical about it): "*Once you become aware it's there, you see it everywhere.*" It's like when you buy a certain year and make of car, and all of a sudden you notice all the others who are driving it, even though before you had it, you never noticed at all!

You see, if we're going to be honest with ourselves, and the Bible, we do have to grapple with it, because it's there! Anyone who takes the Bible seriously at all, doesn't really have the choice of ignoring it. Because it's such a prominent Scriptural truth – controversial or not.

Yet I do have to point this out (because I find it odd): Whereas so many people get upset, or set on edge by it, Paul and all the other Bible writers see it as a source of hope and comfort and strength and encouragement for the Christian!

In Eph. 1:3 Paul praises God that he has: "*Blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ.*" And the very first blessing he points out in the next verse (v. 4) is the fact that: "*God chose us in [Christ] before the creation of the world, to be holy and blameless in His sight.*"

Again in Eph. 1:5 he says: “In love God predestined us to be adopted as His sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with His pleasure and will – to the praise of His glorious grace.”

And we see again in v. 11: “In Christ we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of Him who works out everything in conformity to His will, in order that we, who were the first to hope in Christ, might be for the praise of His glory.”

You see, when it comes to Paul, he sees “predestination” is an unspeakably wonderful thing! Just thinking of it, or meditating on it, or telling others about it, causes him to burst forth in expressions of highest praise!

Why? Because to Paul “*predestination*” is one of the greatest expressions of God’s love! An expression that accentuates the nature of His unfathomable grace and mercy toward sinners, and should leave us speechless before causing our hearts to well up in praise.

So, rather than being an unsettling or upsetting thing, Paul would say it’s a glorious thing! A truth that should bring great comfort and hope and consolation and blessing and peace and rest to the soul!

As the 17th of the Thirty-nine Articles of the Church of England both correctly, and in full accord with Scripture, states: “*A godly consideration of predestination, and our election in Christ, is full of sweet, pleasant and unspeakable comfort to godly persons... drawing up their minds to high and heavenly things, as well as establishing and confirming their faith in the eternal salvation to be enjoyed through Christ, and because it does fervently kindle their love toward God...*”

Paul would agree. That’s EXACTLY what it should do when rightly understood.

So, if our reaction to this doctrine is anything but a similar thankfulness and praise, we need to ask ourselves, “Why”? Why would a truth that brought so much joy and delight to the heart of Paul, and the other Apostle’s, cause ours so much distress?

And the answer? It shouldn’t! It should bring to our hearts the same joy and encouragement it brought theirs – especially when we go through difficult, trying, or heart-wrenching times.

In fact, that’s why Paul WEAVES THIS TRUTH of God’s foreknowledge, sovereign choice, election or predestination, into three entire chapters of Romans – starting here, and going clear through to the end of chap. 11. Because this truth gives encouragement and inner strengthen to the believer’s soul.

So please, even though we’re embarking into what may be new ground for some, and may cause others to struggle for a time (like those I already mentioned), I would ask you to please “stick it out.” As I frequently told my people in Honduras, *“Don’t get upset at ME for preaching on it, or trying to explain it; get upset at the pastors who hid it from you, and never tried to help you understand it!”*

For the calling of every preacher should be (according to Acts 20:27) to preach, “the whole counsel of God,” and not just select parts of it.

Which brings us to our **FIRST** point. Though few ever point it out, in today’s verses Paul gives God’s “foreknowledge” and “predestination” as the BASIS for our assurance that He will, in all things, *“work for the good of those who love Him.”*

In v. 28 (one of the most quoted promises in all Scripture) Paul says: *“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.”*

But the question is, HOW do we KNOW this? Well, v. 29 tells us! We KNOW IT because, *“those God foreknew He also predestined to be conformed to the likeness (or the image) of His Son.”*

What does he mean? He means that because God foreknew and predestined us, not simply to be saved, but also to be sanctified (or as Paul puts it, “conformed to the likeness of His Son”) we can be absolutely assured that He will use all the other things in our life to bring about that predestined purpose in our lives!

If I plan, design and choose to make a device to capture and hold water, I will work on it until it does just that! And if God predestines us (ahead of time) to be conformed to the likeness of Jesus, will He not do what it takes to make sure that come about? Yes, He will!

LISTEN: God would NEVER CHOOSE or PREDESTINE US to be conformed to the likeness of His Son (as part of His stated plan for us from all ages past) and then allow things to work in ways that would be contrary to it, thwart it, or prevent it from ever happening!

That would make Him foolish, inconsistent, unwise & put him at odds with His own purposes! It would show Him to be weak, impotent and unable to carry out what He has eternally planned and determined to do! And Job 42:2 (along with a slew of other texts) tells us that is impossible.

In other words, Paul uses v. 29 to ASSURE US as believers, that the promise of v. 28 is true! Only in knowing God foreknew and predestined us to be both saved and sanctified are we given the unshakable truth we need to be assured that even in our deepest and darkest times of struggle, affliction and trial – God will work for our good. It’s the predestined destiny of ALL who love Him and have been called according to that purpose!

Which brings us to our **SECOND** point. Not only does v. 29 give us the grounds for believing the promise of verse 28, it also defines for us what Paul means by the term “good” given in the promise (showing us once again that vv. 28 & 29 are really dependent upon each other and should not be taken apart from each other, lest it lead to both misunderstanding and misapplication).

In fact, if it weren't for v. 29 I could virtually make the word “good” refer to anything I wanted it to be! It's only when I read v. 28 in light of v. 29 that I discover I can't do that.

I've heard preachers (TV preachers) suggest, or proclaim, that the “good” God promises to bring about from even the worst of catastrophes, is the replacement of things we have lost with better things.

So, for example: If you are somehow to lose your car, the “good” God promises to bring out of that is an even better car! Or if your house burns down, the “good” He promises to bring out of it is a bigger and better house! And on and on I could go!

But if I go on and read v. 29, I realize that's just not true. Because in v. 29 I discover that the term “good” refers to nothing more and nothing less than God's sovereignly decreed purpose to mold His foreknown and predestined children into the likeness of Jesus.

THAT (and nothing more than that) is the “good” God promises to work for in every and any situation in the life of the God-loving believer.

In terms of those other things, God may, or may not, choose to replace them. That's up to Him. Because given this promise, whether He DOES or NOT all depends on what He knows would do more in bringing about our conformity to the likeness of Jesus.

So, if NOT replacing things would make me more compassionate, or humble, or empathetic, or Christ-like, then He may determine not to replace it.

But if it's replacing it that would do so, by making me more thankful, or changing my heart about His mercy and grace, or making me more generous with my things – He may choose to do that.

But this is the key: What He does will ultimately be determined by which one brings about the “good” He promises to work for in all things – our being more conformed to the likeness Jesus.

That's why some people only care to hear this promise, if they can have it without including v. 29. For if the “good” God promises to bring out of “all things” is simply the guarantee to make people more like Jesus – then some people just plain aren't interested.

That may even explain why you will most often see v. 28 on plaques, posters, and necklaces, at Christian Book Stores (and even secular stores) without v. 29. Not simply because it's shorter, but because many people would actually prefer that the promise refer to those other physical type things.

That's why Douglas Moo, in his commentary on Romans, offers this corrective: “The idea that [v. 28] promises the believer material wealth or physical well-being, for instance, portrays a typically modern perversion of the term “good” into an exclusively materialistic interpretation... we must be careful to define “good” in God's terms and not our own.”

So listen: This promise does NOT REFER to material blessings, or any of the other things people so often want it to refer to. It simply promises that in all things God will work to make you more like Jesus – something only a God-loving person, called in accordance with His purpose in Christ, and predestined to that end, would want.

You see, God is committed to a higher good than merely restoring our fortunes, replacing lost things, or healing our bodies. He does care

about our needs. But whether we like to admit it or not, our greatest need, and our highest good, does NOT consist in any of those things – but a holy life and the restoration of the divine image in us.

So after each hardship or trying situation we should ask: *Did it make me more like Christ? / Did it make me more humble, gentle, and compassionate? / Am I now more tender and loving and empathetic? Did I learn to rely on God more or appreciate what I have more, or lean on Jesus more, or be more patient and less judgmental and more gracious?*

Because if it did, God fulfilled His promise to you. He “worked it for your good” even if He never replaced what you lost, restored your health, or brought back that loved one.

Bob Benson put it this way, when in his book, “Something’s Going On Here” he records the following conversation:

“W.T., how did you like your heart attack?” “It scared me to death, almost.” “Would you like to do it again?” “No!” “Would you recommend it?” “Definitely not!” “Does your life mean more to you than it did before?” “Well, yes.” “You and Nell have always had a beautiful marriage, but are you now closer than ever?” “Yes.” “Do you have a new compassion for people – a deeper understanding and sympathy?” “Yes.”

“Do you know the Lord in a richer deeper fellowship than you had ever realized could be possible?” “Well... yes.” “Then how’d you like your heart attack?” Silence was his answer.”

I don’t think I’d be so blunt, but I would try and point out what he was trying to drive home. That we can’t always define “good” in typically human terms! Because scripturally speaking it doesn’t work. And if we persist in doing so we’ll miss out on what God is really seeking to do in our lives – bringing growth from those “things” we would call “bad” situations or circumstances.

And then **LAST**, these two verses have one other function. They give to the believer a framework through which he/she can interpret everything that ever has happened, or will ever happen, to them. It gives us a grid or a filter through which we can sift and make sense of many of the seemingly senseless things that happen in our lives.

To use a “post-modern” phrase, it helps us to see all the circumstances of our lives in light of the overarching Meta-narrative of Divine Redemption, against which, and only against which, the story of our lives, and the sufferings we experience can make sense.

It helps us connect all the seemingly disconnected parts of our lives in light of His divine plan for us. A plan He designed for me, and for you, in eternity past, and has worked out through all your childhood experiences / and all the things that happened to you in your teen years and beyond, right up to the present.

I can ***NOW*** see He did work it all together for my good. All the ups and downs, the sins and the trials, the struggles and pain, the gut-wrenching times of loneliness and depression, the heartache and the failure, the shame and humiliation, as well as the times of protection, grace, mercy, joy, accomplishment and elation.

He worked it all together for the good... *it all makes sense now!*
Because ***NOW*** we can see it all in light of God’s big picture – His eternal and overarching plan to bring us to Christ, and gradually over time, make us more like Christ.

And that helps it all begin to make sense.