



## SALVATION CANNOT BE SABOTAGED

### Grace Reigns: God's Gospel for All Peoples Series #45

Romans 8:28-30

David Sunday

July 10, 2016

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Today, we will be reading in God's Word, beginning at Romans 8:18 and going through verse 30:

*<sup>18</sup> For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us. <sup>19</sup> For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God. <sup>20</sup> For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope <sup>21</sup> that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. <sup>22</sup> For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now. <sup>23</sup> And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. <sup>24</sup> For in this hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what he sees? <sup>25</sup> But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.*

*<sup>26</sup> Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words. <sup>27</sup> And he who searches hearts knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God. <sup>28</sup> And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose. <sup>29</sup> 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. <sup>30</sup> And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified.*

Thank God for His Word that abides forever. Amen.

The Christian is a person who is caught in a tension between what we know and what we don't know. There are things we know to be true, and then there are things that we just do not know. We have to be careful to claim we know more than we do, just as we need to be bold, not shrinking back from proclaiming what we do know to be true.

We're going to look at three points:

1. What we do not know
2. What we do know
3. How we can know what we know for sure

### **What We Do Not Know**

We saw this principle in the beautiful, poignant passage last week—verses 26 and 27. This is a world reeling in pain and frustration, strife and confusion. As believers, verse 26 tells us we are not exempt from the frustration, pain and confusion in this world. It says, "*We do not know what to pray for as we ought.*"

We live in this world in weakness, dear ones. We have a pervasive weakness that touches the very heart of our relationship with God. It touches our prayer lives. But as we saw last week, the Holy Spirit is with us in this pervasive weakness, and He is interceding for us "*with groanings too deep for words.*" When all we can do is groan, the Father Who searches hearts does not see us merely as wee, pathetic creatures, but He sees us as those who are indwelt by His blessed Holy Spirit. And the Father knows what the mind of the Spirit is, and He sees the Spirit interceding for us according to His will.

What comfort this brings us as we carry on in this weary world so full of perplexities. Little did we know last week, as we were looking forward to celebrating the Fourth of July, that this would again be a terrible, terrible week in the life of our nation. I read that during President Obama's tenure the flag has been flown at half-mast more than during any other presidency this nation has known.

We saw yesterday the headline in the Daily Herald: "This Must Stop!" The world is weary. People are perplexed. "Can this really be America in 2106?" the paper reads. Three tumultuous days, culminating in five police officers shot to death in Dallas. There they are on the front page of the newspaper. Seven others wounded. "America is weeping," said Congressman G.K. Butterfield. Who doesn't feel the mounting anger, tension and despair that is filling our nation in these days of desperation? And what Christian doesn't resonate with Paul's words, "*We do not*

*know to pray for as we ought*”? As I tried to absorb the news since Tuesday, there's a lot I just do not know.

I do not know, for instance, what it's like to grow up as an African-American male in the streets of an inner city and to fear that I might be suspected or targeted for a crime I did not commit, only because of the color of my skin. Nor do I know what it is like to go out day by day into those streets to serve and protect the community as a police officer; or what it is like to be the spouse of a police officer, knowing that when you kiss your spouse goodbye, he or she may not return to you that night. I do not know what the loved ones of Alton Sterling in Baton Rouge, or Philando Castile in St. Paul are going through right now. Nor do I know the grief that grips the hearts of the families of Lorne Ahrens, Mike Krol, Michael Smith, Brent Thompson and Patrick Zamarripa, those five Dallas police officers killed in the line of duty.

I do not know who to trust among our politicians, when it seems like truth is trampled upon and nothing matters more than protecting one's own image. We groan. We groan, along with creation. We lament. We long for a new creation in which the words of Isaiah the prophet will no longer characterize the world in which we live. Isaiah 59:9-15 says it so well (New Living Translation):

*<sup>9</sup> So there is no justice among us, and we know nothing about right living. We look for light but find only darkness. We look for bright skies but walk in gloom. <sup>10</sup> We grope like the blind along a wall, feeling our way like people without eyes. Even at brightest noontime, we stumble as though it were dark. Among the living, we are like the dead. <sup>11</sup> We growl like hungry bears; we moan like mournful doves. We look for justice, but it never comes. We look for rescue, but it is far away from us. <sup>12</sup> For our sins are piled up before God and testify against us. Yes, we know what sinners we are. <sup>13</sup> We know we have rebelled and have denied the Lord. We have turned our backs on our God. We know how unfair and oppressive we have been, carefully planning our deceitful lies. <sup>14</sup> Our courts oppose the righteous, and justice is nowhere to be found. Truth stumbles in the streets, and honesty has been outlawed. <sup>15</sup> Yes, truth is gone, and anyone who renounces evil is attacked.*

That is God's Word about a society that does not acknowledge Him. That is a searching analysis of our world's condition. You're not going to hear that from a politician, from a journalist—even from most preachers. That is the truth.

We are living in desperate times, and as believers, we should not be surprised or alarmed at the evil that is all around us, because we have seen something of the evil that is within us. We should not be dismayed by what's happening in the world. Believers are not people who expect

everything in the world to be good and easy and favorable toward us. We are not disillusioned by all the senseless acts of terror that fill our streets. We are grieved, brokenhearted and we are praying for the bloodshed to end. Whether it's white blood or black blood or blue blood or gay blood, we are praying for this to end.

But we are not disillusioned. We are not in despair. We do not give up our commitment to Christ or to His gospel, and we do not shrink back from the pain and suffering of our neighbors. We are ready to help. We are ready to bring hope. We are ready to encourage. We are able to rejoice, because what we do know makes sense of what we don't know. What we do know puts what we don't know into perspective. What we do know can give hope to a nation that doesn't know what to do. What we do know is what we need to make known to a world that is spiraling in despair.

So let's stop talking about what we don't know right now, and let's talk about what we do know.

## What We Do Know

There are two things in the passage we read a couple weeks ago that Paul says we know. The first is in verses 22-23, "**We know** that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now. And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies."

You see, we understand what's happening in the world today at its most basic level: creation is groaning. And we know that the creation's groaning is not going to end in despair, but in new birth. It's not the groaning of death—it's the groaning of a woman who is in labor. And yes, it might feel like a woman who's in labor out in the wilderness without anesthesia, but nonetheless, new birth is coming.

We know this world that seems to spiral out of control is actually destined for glory. There is a purpose God has for this creation and He is guiding us to a glorious end. We know that we who trust in Jesus Christ are going to experience that glory, a glory that's going to make all the sufferings we've tasted on this earth seem like nothing in comparison. We know that we are not dependent on governments or on fallen systems to bring about the peace and wholeness for which this world is so desperate.

No, Jesus is coming again, and the government will be upon His shoulders (Isaiah 9:6). We are the children of God, and when we are finally redeemed from all the effects of sin, this created world will stop groaning. God Himself "*will wipe every tear from [our] eyes, and death*

*shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain anymore, for the former things [will] have passed away, and he who [is] seated on the throne [will say], 'Behold, I am making all things new'"* (Revelation 21:4-5). This we know, and it changes our perspective on all we don't know. This is our future hope, and it gives us the strength we need to persevere with joy in this fallen world.

But there's something else Paul tells us we know. Believers, you know this. You're not in the dark. You are confident of this. It's in verse 28. And this truth you know, this reality you are sure of, makes you strong and courageous. It makes you bold and willing to suffer without complaint. Why? Because "***we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.***" Paul doesn't say, "We hope this is true" or "We wish this was true." He says, "We know this is true."

Some people might use this verse as a cliché, but I beg of you not to think of it that way. Do think of this verse as a pillow on which to rest your weary head. But also think of this verse as a shot in the arm to get you back up on your feet, running the race, fighting the good fight, not giving up until Jesus calls you home. Be strengthened. Get iron in your spiritual bloodstream from this verse.

This isn't just a nice thought to give out indiscriminately to anyone who is having a hard time. This isn't Hallmark-card sentimentality. This is what Scotty Smith calls "the home room of Christianity." This is where we keep returning, morning after morning after morning. This is where we check in for the day. This is the bedrock reality of God's providence that is ruling and guiding our lives, and this is good news for a particular people. It is good news "*for those who love God*" and "*are called according to his purpose.*"

What a wonderful description this is of a Christian! In Paul's mind, Christians first and foremost are people who love God. He doesn't start with the doctrines we believe. He starts with the affection of our hearts for the living God that results in the commitment of our lives to Him, no matter what He brings into our lives. We love God because we know He first loved us. We experienced His love for us in the call He issued to us in the gospel to know Him, to love Him and to live for Him when we were still dead in our trespasses and sins.

So for those of us who love God, Paul says, we can know that all the time God is working—in all the circumstances of our lives—He is never sleeping nor slumbering. He is at work in our world. He is at work in our lives for His glory and for our good. That means there's nothing in our past that puts us on the shelf. There's nothing in our present that can separate us from His presence. And there's nothing in our future that will cause Him to forego His purpose or that will sever our souls from His love.

“For those who love God,” Paul says, “**all things work together for good.**” Not just some things. Not just pleasant things. Not just the things you like. All things. If you love Him, if you have responded to the call of the gospel, you can be sure that there is absolutely nothing you could experience that will fall outside the scope and the range of the “*all things*” mentioned in Romans 8:28. Everything that comes into your life God is working together for good.

“*All things*” includes evil things. Even evil things work together for good. It doesn’t mean cancer is good. It’s evil. It doesn’t mean abuse is good. It doesn’t mean evil is good. And it doesn’t mean we passively acquiesce in a stoic kind of way to evil. No, we stand opposed to evil. We resist evil. We do whatever is in our power to expose and defeat evil. But we know that God is a Masterful Coordinator. He is a great Tapestry Weaver. He is able to take even the darkest threads, overruling the devil’s evil intentions, and can bring about a gloriously and completely good outcome. That’s what we know: “*All things work together for good.*”

What comfort that gave Kate and me as she was facing her ordeal with cancer a few years ago. We knew God said, “I will not turn away from doing good to you. I have not—I will not ever turn away from doing good. So even now I’m working good through this.” And He surely did. All things—including your own sin, including your own folly—God works together for good.

You may come here today reeling under the consequences of your sin. But you must never think that your sin is outside the range and scope of this glorious promise, that somehow your sin is the exception to the “all things” God is working together for good in your life and in His eternal purpose. I love this quote by the Puritan Timothy Rogers:

The hand of God is so strong, and His wisdom is so admirable, that He turns to our profit and advantage not only the evils which are caused by cross events, or by the world, but those which we commit ourselves and that seem to be contrary to our salvation. He changes these poisons into medicine, these scandals into edification, and from the thickest darkness He brings out light.

Would you take that to heart today? Maybe you’ve been thinking for the last several years, “After that terrible detour I took down that dead end, where I did those terrible things, my life for God is on pause. He’s done with me. He can’t use me anymore. I can’t rejoice after that.” Take to heart the truth that He can change that poison into medicine, that scandal into edification; that from the thickest darkness God can bring out light. “*All things work together for good.*”

That doesn’t mean you take sin lightly. There are painful consequences you have to bear in your conscience, your relationships, your ministry, your finances, maybe in your health.

Nonetheless, you need to bear those consequences with great confidence: “My sin cannot sabotage God’s salvation in my life. My sin cannot destroy God’s saving purpose to make me like His Son, because my sin was the very reason Jesus came to redeem me. Is God going to let that sin ruin Jesus’ redemptive purposes in my life? Will He not turn all things—even the most sinful things I have done—and work them together for good?”

Yes, He will, Paul says. We know this is true. We know God works all things together for good because we see it in the examples of people in Scripture like Joseph, who in the end said that whatever men intended for evil in his life, God intended for good, to bring about the salvation of multitudes. We know this is true because the prophet Jeremiah spoke to the exiles in Babylon, saying while they were in exile, *“For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans for wholeness and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope”* (Jeremiah 29:11).

We know ultimately that this true because God took the greatest evil ever done in the universe—the murder of His own Son at the hands of lawless men—and turned it into the greatest good. For an eternity we will experience the good God brought out of that evil. We know this is true, Paul says.

So marvel at His wisdom, praise Him for His goodness and rest in His sovereignty over all. Let this verse control how you think about yourself and your circumstances, your struggles and your future. Let this truth give you strength in the hard places to trust God in those hard places. Let it help you wait for God in the stressful times of your life where you don’t know what the outcome is going to be. Let this truth help you stand up for God when no one else is standing, when you’re alone, when you’re the target. Let this truth help you take risks for the sake of the Kingdom to bring the gospel of God through all the world.

Luis just gave a great testimony in writing of a man he interviewed recently in a different country, a convert from Islam, telling about all the different places in the world where God is working to bring Muslims to Himself. One of the points of that testimony was that this man was saying, “Muslims need to be unafraid to proclaim the gospel to their friends and neighbors, because people are crying out for a Savior in this world.”

Truth like this makes us bold. What do we have to lose if God is working it all together for good? If we love the Lord, we should take heart that nothing can ever really harm us. Everything that happens to us—even the most grievous things—God is making sure they’re going to help us to our final salvation.

So God is sovereign over everything that touches us, and He’s working for our good in those things—but He’s not necessarily working for our liking. He will give us everything we need, but not necessarily everything we want. Listen to what John Newton wisely counseled:

“Everything is needful that God sends; nothing can be needful that He withholds.” Isn't that good? Doesn't that put things in perspective? God will give you everything you need for His purpose to be fulfilled in your life.

By the way, what is His purpose? Look at the middle of Romans 8:29, “...*that we would be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers.*” That's what God is working all things together for—to make you more like Jesus. So getting what you want is not always what you need to become more like Jesus. Everything is needful that God sends; nothing can be needful that He withholds.

Another quote I thought was good is by Tim Keller: “Good circumstances can be terrible for you and bad circumstances wonderful for you. Because God's master design is to shape, polish, melt, smooth, sculpt, frame, cast and contour us into the mold of Christ's perfect greatness.”

Think about that. I don't know if it feels good to be melted. If someone gets everything they possibly want out of this life, but they don't end conformed to the image of God's Son, they've lost everything. That sounds like a lot of pressure, a lot of chafing, a lot of pain—but what a great outcome: to be molded into Christ's perfect greatness. That's God's purpose in all things for the believer.

What a difference this makes in our lives. It's so important that we don't just stop at Romans 8:28, isn't it? We have to read verse 29 too, because that's what sheds light on what the purpose of God is in our lives and it will not fail.

Let me tell you the story of Dr. Russell Moore, who is now president of the Evangelical Religious Liberty Commission. You might see him in the news; he often gives a very winsome witness for Christ in the midst of this cultural storm. I just encourage you to read and watch Dr. Russell Moore.

He tells the story of how when he attended Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, his wife, Maria, had just suffered a miscarriage—their third lost pregnancy. He says, “The doctors had told us we'd never be able to have children. Our house was funereal. I was growing despondent and even bitter toward God. I could see all my friends becoming parents, and I was looking at a lonely future with just the two of us—and, I feared, a house full of cats.” (No criticism of cats there. Those are Moore's words, not mine.)

“Tom and Margaret Nettles (Tom is a professor at Southern Baptist Seminary) were the first to our house. He didn't exegete the book of Job, or reiterate his lecture notes on the sovereignty of God and personal suffering. He sat with us in silence for a long time. He wept with us and prayed with us.” That's good shepherding.

“As they were leaving, though, he stopped at the door and spoke words I still hear. ‘Russell, Romans 8:28 is often quoted at a time like this—and rightly so. But I think you need to hear Romans 8:29. God has promised you something. He has promised to do whatever it takes to conform you into the image of Christ, so that He might be the firstborn among many brothers. I don’t know why this is happening to you and Maria. It’s awful. I can’t tell you the reason God is permitting you to walk this path, and I can’t tell you exactly where He is taking you in it. But I know this: God is committed to shaping you into the image of Jesus, and that’s for your good. He hasn’t forgotten you, and He hasn’t forsaken you.’”

Russell says, “I doubt I would have heard those words if they had come before the tears and the silence. But because they came after those things, I heard them with my heart. And what I heard was a call—first, to repentance. In my fear, anxiety and self-obsession, I had forgotten the gospel. I thought God owed me the life I expected for myself, and I was angry at Him—rather than being driven to cast my anxieties on Him as the One Who cares for us.”

I think that’s where we may need to be right now. Sometimes we get really tired of living for Jesus in this world. We get really bewildered by everything we’re seeing and we get weary. We want to rest and isolate ourselves. We don’t want to live all out for Jesus anymore. Sometimes if we’re honest, we’re a little bit bitter—or very bitter—at the things God’s bringing into our lives.

We’ve forgotten His purpose to mold us into the image of His Son, haven’t we? That’s what He predestined us for. If we think God owes us the life we expect for ourselves, we’ll get angry, anxious and bewildered when things aren’t going our way. But if we’re clear about what God’s purpose is for our lives—to conform us to the image of His Son—then we can be confident in His care for us, and we can be sure that He will fulfill His purpose for our lives.

I want to end with Psalm 138:7-8 from the New Living Translation. This is a precious Scripture that has meant a lot to me. It first jumped off the page in those months when we were facing Kate’s cancer, and many, many times on my way through the Psalms I’ve stopped here and thanked God for the affirmation of these truths.

The psalmist says:

*Though I am surrounded by troubles,  
you will protect me from the anger of my enemies.  
You reach out your hand,  
and the power of your right hand saves me.  
8 The LORD will work out his plans for my life—  
for your faithful love, O LORD, endures forever.  
Don’t abandon me, for you made me.*

That's God working all things together for our good. My enemies are angry and they want to destroy me, but You reach out Your hand—and the power of Your right hand saves me. Then David says, *“The Lord will work out his plans for my life.”* He'll do that for you who love Him. Or as the ESV says, *“The Lord will fulfill his purpose for me.”*

That's us expressing our fear: “Lord, if You leave me alone I am lost. I cannot navigate my way through this world that is so full of perplexing things that I do not know what to do about. But if Your hand is upon me, if Your faithful love will never forsake me, if You are committed to fulfilling Your purpose in my life, no matter what, then Lord, I can rejoice. I can be bold. I can live all out for Jesus in this world.” That's what we're called to do.

### **How We Can Know What We Know For Sure**

I'm not going to do point three today but will save it for next week. How do we know what we know to be true? Because *“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. 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'll talk more about the meaning of all those words next week.

But just ask yourself, when did this happen?

- When were you foreknown in the mind of God? When were you predestined? Way before the dawn of time.
- When were you called and when were you justified? At some point in the history of your life, when you heard the gospel and believed.
- When will you be glorified? At some point in the future when you see Jesus face to face.

But did you notice the tense Paul used for that verb “glorified”? He speaks of it as if it's an already-done deal. He says that in the mind of God it's like this has already happened, because this is an unbreakable chain in the purposes of God. Your salvation is secure from start to finish. It cannot be sabotaged. In God's mind, your standing before Him in glory looking just like Jesus is such a certainty—it is a done deal. It's as if it's already happened in the mind of God. He is that committed to fulfilling His purposes for you.

So let that give you confidence. Let's go back to that verse from Psalm 138 and affirm this together:

*Though I am surrounded by troubles,  
you will protect me from the anger of my enemies.  
You reach out your hand,*

*and the power of your right hand saves me.  
The Lord will work out his plans for my life—  
for your faithful love, O Lord, endures forever.  
Don't abandon me, for you made me.*

Let's pray together.

We come to You, our Father, in the adoration, praise and thanksgiving for Your perfect wisdom, for Your unfailing love, for Your constant activity in our lives that is always for our good and according to Your purpose to make us more like Jesus. We need Your help, Father, to not be bewildered by all the things we cannot understand, help trust in the wisdom of Your plan, help live by faith in what we cannot yet see. We confess to You our failures to trust You, our anxiety, cowardice and tendency to shrink back in fear. You are our Provider and our Protector. Forgive us, we pray, for anxiously fretting about how to provide for ourselves and pridefully seeking to protect ourselves.

We also confess to You our indifference toward those who are suffering in this world, in our neighborhoods, in the grocery stores we'll go to, in the restaurants we'll visit this week. Help us, Lord, to love our neighbor as ourselves, and help us to share the light of Your truth and the good news of Your gospel in a world where truth seems to be gone, where truth stumbles in the streets, where there is so often no justice, and where law and order is so often trampled upon.

Help us, Lord, to be not taking our talking points from Fox News or CNN or talk radio, but to be listening to Your Word, the Bible and to Your Son, our Savior, Who tells us to love our neighbor as ourselves. Lord, we do not know the motives of other people's hearts, but we know where You're taking all of this, and it's going to be glorious. We know how You're working in our lives, and we pray that through our witness, many, many other people might come to know this good news.

Father, for our nation, we pray with grief today for those who are grieving. We pray for the families of Alton Sterling in Baton Rouge and Philando Castile in St. Paul. Draw near and help them to know what we know today. We pray for mercy for the families of Lorne Ahrens, Mike Krol, Michael Smith, Brent Thompson and Patrick Zamarripa, and all the Dallas police officers who are still in the hospital, and the scores of other police officers who have been killed in the line of duty during this past year. We pray, Lord, shine the light of this gospel truth into their hearts.

We thank You, Lord, for those in our own church family who serve or have served to protect and defend our freedoms and peace. We thank You for Ryan Larson who this past week was inducted into the Barrington police force, and we pray for Your protection upon him and

Your empowerment of his service. He is, according to Your Word, a minister for our community's good.

Lord, we thank You that in all these things we can be confident that You will fulfill Your purpose for us. You will hold us fast, and in this we rejoice. Amen.

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