

IF GOD BE FOR US

by Ray C. Stedman

Last week, when we looked at a section from Romans 8 under the title of *The Agony and the Ecstasy*, none of us knew that this very week a family among us would be passing through an experience of deep and heart-felt agony, and that mingled with that agony would be the joy and ecstasy of a new life. Little did we know that a baby girl would be born to a couple from this church on the same day that they suffered the death of their son. But life is like that -- a strange intermixture of good and bad, of heartache and joy, that we oftentimes find very hard to understand. But the glory of Christianity is that, whether our hearts are aching or rejoicing, there is no incident or circumstance -- no matter how trivial -- that is without purpose or meaning. God has declared that "all things work together for good to those who love him, who are the called according to his purpose," {cf, Rom 8:28}.

That great statement of the apostle in this eighth chapter introduces to us the climax of this letter to the Romans. It is capsulized in Verse 28, which I just quoted. We are called "according to his purpose." God has a purpose. There is purpose in life. What seems to be a meaningless jumble of events in history is not meaningless at all; there is a purpose to every event. Everything is moving to accomplish a desired end, and that end is the subject of this whole letter to the Romans. That is what it is all about: How God works through human history to accomplish his one great and enduring purpose.

Paul puts that purpose in short words in Verse 28. God's purpose, in effect, is to have many sons, all of whom will love him with all their hearts. That is what God is after. That takes us back to what Jesus said: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and all your mind and all your soul and all your strength. This is the first and greatest commandment," {cf, Matt 22:37-38 NIV}. To accomplish that, God called the world into being, set up the whole universe, peopled the earth with a race of men, permitted them to fall, sent into this sin-ridden earth his own beloved Son, accomplished the cross and the resurrection, and now, as Paul so clearly says, "works all things together for good to those who love him, who are the called according to that great purpose," {cf, Rom 8:28}.

In this we have a tremendous statement of what life is all about. We see that God's purpose is to have a race of people, his own children, who will love him. Love is the end and aim of life. To accomplish this, Paul summarizes the process that God follows. Paul looks back through this letter to the Romans and sums up in five brief steps the process that God takes (Verses 29-30):

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; those he justified, he also glorified. {Rom 8:29-30 NIV}

These are the five steps that God takes, stretching from eternity to eternity -- far greater than any of our individual lives would suggest. Nevertheless, this is what brings us to faith. I want to make clear that in this passage the Apostle Paul is not touching the question of why some people believe and some do not. That is the problem of election, which we will face when we get to Chapter 9. All that man's ability to reason and think can comprehend about that subject is clearly stated in the ninth chapter. But that is not what Paul is talking about here. He is not facing the mystery of election. He is simply describing what is back of those who believe, what has already happened when, as Christians, we look back to see how God brought us to this place. There are five steps:

The first step is that *God foreknew* us.

A lot of people talk about how God foreknew what we were going to do, he foreknew that we would believe in Christ. There is a certain line of teaching that says God looked down the corridor of time and saw that we

would believe in Christ, and therefore he chose us to be part of God's elect because of what we were going to do. Now, this verse, as I have already suggested, is not dealing with that question. This verse says "those whom he foreknew," not "that which he foreknew." It is concerned, therefore, with the question of existence. It is telling us that from among the tremendous number of human beings that have been spawned onto this earth since the creation of man, God foreknew that you and I would be there -- as well as all the believers who have preceded us or who will follow us in the course of history.

Now, when you consider the fact that at every birth the chances that you and I should be the one that should emerge from that union are somewhere in the range of one to one or two hundred million, this is a remarkable statement. Because of the abundance of sperm to one ovum, doctors tell us that the possibility that any one particular person could be foretold and foreknown is fantastic -- the odds are one to two hundred million for every single birth. So, when you consider that, out of all those possibilities, God has seen that we would be the ones who would come -- and not only us, but all believers of all time, in all ages -- you begin to get some staggering understanding of the mind and the wisdom of God. It is simply mind-blowing to think that God would have the ability to do this.

We are impressed by great computers that amass huge numbers of facts and put together amounts of information that none of us as individuals could ever handle. But these computers are nothing! They are children's toys, compared with the greatness of the mind of God, who saw all the fantastic possibilities and yet knew that we would be there. Not only that, but he knew it long before the world was ever called into being! That is the amazing statement of the Scriptures. Before the foundation of the earth, God foreknew that we would be here. Now, I cannot go any further than that. That baffles me, and bewilders me, but, nevertheless, it is fact. This is where Paul begins.

Then, Paul says, the next step is that *God predestined* .

"Ah," you say, "I know what that means! That means God looked over the whole group and said, 'Now these will go to hell, and those will go to heaven.'" Predestination has absolutely nothing to do with going to hell. In the Word of God, predestination is never related to that in any way whatsoever. To think of predestination in those terms is completely unbiblical. Predestination has to do only with believers. It simply tells us that God has selected before hand the goal toward which he is going to move every one of us who believes in Christ. That goal is conformity to the character of Christ. Everything that happens to us focuses on that one supreme purpose.

If we understand that, it will help to explain some of the conundrums of our lives. We think that God's primary objective is our happiness, but the Scriptures never say that. God is interested in our happiness, and eventually our happiness is involved in all that God does, but that is not his primary concern. His primary concern is for our character. God knows we can never develop the character he wants without times of difficulty and trial and suffering. That is why suffering is an inevitable part of the picture. It helps us to remember that God's primary objective is not that we be happy all the time. He is not that kind of a father. Rather, his primary objective is that we be holy, which means "whole," "complete," all that we were intended to be, functioning as God intended us to function, like Jesus.

We have all noticed that God is forming a lot of characters. In fact, he is going to end up with a whole heaven full of them. But one distinctive thing about those characters is that they are all like Jesus. They all have different personalities, but they all have the same, basic, fundamental character: loving, gracious, gentle, wholesome, helpful, compassionate -- all the things that marked that magnificent life of Jesus interpreted in a thousand and one different ways in our human lives. That is the wonder and the glory of God. That is what he has predestined: {that} there shall be many brethren, and {that} Jesus should be the firstborn among many just like him.

The third step is that *God called* us.

Those who God foreknew he also predestined; and those he predestined, he also called. This is where we get into the act. Up to this point, the passage has been concerned with God's mind and purpose, but now we suddenly become involved in the picture. Those whom God has foreknown and predestined, he now calls.

I could not begin to describe to you the mystery and wonder that is involved in this. This means that the Holy Spirit somehow begins 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 does not make any difference. God begins to work and he draws us to himself.

Jesus said, "All that my Father has given me shall come unto me. Not one shall be lost," {cf, John 6:65}. This is what he means. The Holy Spirit begins to draw us and woo us and open our minds and create interest in our hearts. We think we are getting religious, but we are only responding to the drawing of the Spirit of God. We are not aware of this -- we think it is our choice. In a sense, we do have to make a choice, and in Chapter 9 we will look more fully at this mystery of our free will and God's sovereign choice. Nevertheless, we are being drawn in ways we do not understand.

The Apostle Paul was converted in the brilliant light on the Damascus road when he saw the glory of the Lord shining about him greater than the sun. He heard a voice that said to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me? Is it not hard for you to kick against the goads?" {Acts 26:14b NIV}. By that last phrase the Lord Jesus indicated that he understood that Paul was fighting, struggling, kicking, trying to hold on to his independence -- but he was being dragged relentlessly to a fate he could not escape. That is what happens to all of us. We do not understand it, but it is true.

Dr. Harry Ironside used to tell about a man who gave his testimony, telling how God had sought him and found him, how God had loved him and called him and saved him, delivered him, cleansed him, and healed him -- a tremendous testimony to the glory of God. After the meeting, one rather legalistic brother took him aside and said, "You know, I appreciate all that you said about what God did for you, but you didn't mention anything about your part in it. Salvation is really part us and part God, and you should have mentioned something about your part." "Oh," the man said, "I apologize. I'm sorry; I really should have mentioned that. My part was running away, and his part was running after me until he found me."

That is what Paul is saying here. God called us. Those whom he predestined, he also called.

Fourth, those God called, *he justified*.

All along in this letter we have been looking at what justification means. It is God's gift of worth. Those who are justified are valuable in his sight. They are forgiven, cleansed, and given the position before him of being loved, accepted, wanted, and endeared. This is justification -- being given the gift of worth without any cause on your part at all. By the cross, God was freed to give the gift of righteousness. Had he given it apart from the cross, he could have been properly accused of condoning sin -- but the cross freed him. It established his righteous justice on other grounds, so that he is now free to give to us the gift of worth without any merit on our part.

Then, finally, those God justified, *he also glorified*.

Paul writes as though this had already happened. It has already begun, it is true. Glorification is what Paul calls "the revelation of the sons of God," {cf, Rom 8:19}. It is the exciting day which the whole creation is anticipating, when God is suddenly going to pull back the curtains on what he has been doing with the human race. Suddenly, the sons of God will stand out in glory.

But in a sense, as we have said, this has already begun. It is what we call, in theological terms, *sanctification*. Sanctification is the process by which the inner worth which God imparts to our human spirit by faith in Christ begins to work itself out into our conduct. We actually begin to change. We begin to be like what we actually are. Therefore, our attitudes change, and our actions change, and our habits begin to change, and we stop certain things and begin others. Our whole demeanor is different; we become much more gracious, happy, wholesome persons. That is called sanctification, and that is the process of glorification; it has already started.

We all know how this works. We all are aware of how wonderful it is when someone we know to be nothing but a ding-a-ling begins to change. How much easier that person is to live with! We see that the glorification

has already begun.

That is the process that Paul says is inevitable. God has started it, that is what he is doing, and that is what he is going to complete at the day of the revelation of the sons of God. So Paul writes here as though it were already done: "Those whom God justified, he also glorified."

There are none lost in the process. Those whom he foreknew, before the foundation of the world, he also predestined to conform to the likeness of his Son; the same number of people he called; and the ones he called, he also justified; the very ones he justified, he also glorified. No one is lost in the process, 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 does -- no matter what it takes.

At this point Paul asks the final question:

What, then, shall we say in response to this? {Rom 8:31a NIV}

What can you say? All you can say is "Thank you. How great thou art!" The response of the heart is, "Father, I love you." And that is what God is after. He is after the love of men -- the uncoerced, unforced love of men, despite their pressures, their problems, their heartaches, whatever they go through. Therefore, the rest of this letter is a beautiful description of how to love God.

The nature of love to God is outlined for us in three questions which the apostle asks in this last section.

The first one is found in Verse 31:

If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for all of us -- how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things? {Rom 8:31b-32 NIV}

If you have understood all that God has done for you, your first response of love is to say to yourself, "If God is for me, who can be against me?" You love God when you work out and reflect on the implications of his saving commitment to you. The moment you think this through, and say to yourself, "If God has done this, and God is for me, then this and this and this must be true," and you rejoice in that truth, you are loving God. You are responding as he intended you to respond to his love for you.

Now, what is the effect of this realization? It is clear from this passage that it is the removal of fear. If God is for us, who can be against us? All fear of successful opposition is removed. It is not that there is no opposition. The devil is still there, the Democrats are still there, the Communists are still there -- there is still going to be opposition. But Paul is saying, "If God is for us, what difference does it make?" If God is for us, who can be against us? (And I don't mean "us" as Republicans, either!)

A few weeks ago at our elders' meeting, Barney Brogan was telling us about his grandson. His daughter has moved to Missouri with the boys. As some of you know, their father is Chicano, and the children look like their dad. Their 13-year-old ran into a tremendous nest of White Supremacy at school. Because of the prejudice against blacks and Chicanos, that little innocent lad began to suffer very unjust torment and persecution. He didn't understand it; he came home weeping, beaten up because of his looks. His mother didn't know what to do, and so she wrote and asked us to pray for this situation, and we did.

A week or so later a letter came back and described how one night the biggest kid in school appeared at their door and said that he was a Christian, that he knew they were Christians, and that he had come to tell them that he had gone to every kid in school who had beat up on the boy and told them that if they ever did anything like that again, they would answer to him. I don't know what that boy's name was, but let's call him Mike. I can imagine this little boy going back to school, walking in the shadow of Mike, with all his tormentors looking at him. He probably would be saying to himself, "If Mike is for me, who can be against me?" That is what God is saying here. That is what David said in the twenty-seventh Psalm:

**The Lord is my light and my salvation;
whom shall I fear?
The Lord is the defense of my life;
whom shall I dread? {Psa 27:1 NIV}**

That is what we ought to be saying when trouble strikes, when difficulty comes, and when opposition appears. We ought to think it through, and say, "This is the way we love God. And if God be for me, who can be against me?"

Not only does our belief in God's love for us remove our fear of opposition, but, as Verse 32 indicates, it also removes our fear of want:

**He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all -- how will he not also,
along with him, graciously give us all things? {Rom 8:32 NIV}**

He who has already given us the best, the greatest, the dearest, the most precious thing he has, and who did so while we were sinners -- while we were enemies, while we were helpless -- will he not also give us some of these trivial, piddling little things that we need?

If someone thinks enough of you to give you a costly, brilliant, beautiful, flawless diamond, do you think he will object when you ask him for the box that goes with it? If a mother will give up a baby, do you think she will object if they ask to take his clothes too? And if God has given us his own Son already, do you really think God is going to withhold anything else that we need? Paul's argument is unanswerable: Of course he won't. We can say with David in the twenty-third Psalm, "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want," {Psa 23:1}. The first sign that we love God, then, is that fear is removed. We begin to face our lack, face our enemies, and say, "If God be for us, who can be against us?"

The second question Paul asks of those who know God's love for them is found in Verses 33-34:

**Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies.
Who is he that condemns? Christ Jesus, who died -- more than that, who was raised to
life -- is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us. {Rom 8:33-34 NIV}**

This is a reminder of the work that God has done. We love God when we trust in the full effect of his work on our behalf. Paul is looking back over the letter, and sees two great works that God has done:

The first is justification. "Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen?" Who can? It is God who justifies. Justification means that nothing and no one anywhere can accuse us successfully before God. Now, the devil is the accuser of the brethren. He will try to accuse us constantly. This verse tells us that we must not listen to his voice. We must not listen to these thoughts that condemn us, that put us down, that make us feel that there is no hope for us. These thoughts will come -- they cannot be stopped -- but we do not have to listen to them. We know God is not listening to these accusations. Who can condemn us when God justifies us? Therefore we refuse to be condemned.

We don't do this by ignoring our sin or trying to cover it over, or pretending that it isn't there; we do it by admitting that we fully deserve to be condemned, but that God, through Christ, has already borne our guilt. That is the only way out. That is why Christians should not hesitate to admit their failure and their sin. You will never be justified until you admit it. But when you admit it, then you also can face the full glory of the fact that God justifies the ungodly, and therefore there is no condemnation.

Then Paul raises the question, "Who is he that condemns? Who is going to do this? The only one who has the right is Jesus -- and Jesus died for us. And more than that, he was raised to life for us, he is now at the right hand of God in power for us, and he is also interceding for us. So there is no chance that he is going to condemn us. This is a reference to the power that we have to take hold afresh of the life of Jesus. Not only is our guilt set aside, but we have power imparted to us -- his life in us, his risen life made available to us now.

So we can rise up and say "No!" to the temptations that surround us and the habits that drag us down; we can be a victor over them. That is not a mere dogma; we are in touch with a living person. That is the glory of Christianity. The unique distinction of Christians is that we have Jesus.

I know that every cult, every new faith, every false faith around, old and new, offers some kind of an experience, perhaps a mystic experience, or some sense of peace or freedom. That is what they are all based on. We must not discount these, for they can do some of these things. But the difference is that they do not have a grounding in history. There is no assurance that these experiences are reality. But we Christians have a grounding in the history of Jesus. He came, he died, he rose again. These are unmistakable facts. Therefore, when we come to Jesus, we come to someone we know exists. We know he is there. Therefore, the experience that we go through is real.

Dr. A. W. Tozer, that grand old prophet of Chicago, states it like this:

The teaching of the New Testament is that now, at this very moment, there is a Man in heaven appearing in the presence of God for us. He is as certainly a man as was Adam or Moses or Paul; he is a man glorified, but his glorification did not de-humanize him. Today he is a real man, of the race of mankind, bearing our lineaments and dimensions, a visible and audible man, whom any other man would recognize instantly as one of us. But more than this, he is the heir of all things, Lord of all lords, head of the church, firstborn of the new creation. He is the way to God, the life of the believer, the hope of Israel, and the high priest of every true worshiper. He holds the keys of death and hell, and stands as advocate and surety for everyone who believes on him in truth. Salvation comes not by accepting the finished work, or deciding for Christ; it comes by believing on the Lord Jesus Christ, the whole, living, victorious Lord who, as God and man, fought our fight and won it, accepted our debt as his own and paid it, took our sins and died under them, and rose again to set us free. This is the true Christ; nothing less will do.

Our whole relationship rests upon that magnificent person.

That brings us to the third and last question: How do you love God? Well, you love him by reminding yourself of the implications of his continual, unchanging commitment to you. You love him by remembering and trusting the full effect of his work for you. And finally, you love God by answering this question (Verse 35):

Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? {Rom 8:35a NIV}

Who or what is going to do it? Is there any force, anywhere, that can come between you and Jesus?

Here the apostle is facing the question that many people ask. Is there any way to lose your salvation? Who can remove us from Christ, once we fully come to him? Paul's answer is, "Let's take a look at the possibilities."

First, can all the troubles and dangers of life separate us from his love (Verses 35-36)?

Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? As it is written:

**"For your sake we face death all the day long;
we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered." {Rom 8:35b-36 NIV}**

That is life at its worst. Will that do it? Verse 37:

No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. {Rom 8:37 NIV}

Trouble is catastrophe and disasters, such as we have just had this week. Will hardship do it? That means the tight, narrow places we have to go through sometimes. Will persecution do it? That is hurt deliberately inflicted on us because we are Christians. Will famine, lack of food and money do it? Will nakedness, or lack of clothes? Will danger, or threat to our lives? Will the sword (war, riot, uprising) do it? "No," Paul says, "In these we are superconquerors." Why? Because rather than dividing us from Christ, they draw us closer to him. They make us cling harder. They scare us and make us run to him. When we are independent and think

we can make it on our own, these things strike, and we start whimpering and running for home, and we cling all the closer. We can never be defeated then, so we are more than conquerors.

What about supernatural forces? What about people and power and demons and strange forces (Verses 38-39)?

For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation [literally, anything even in a different creation], will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord. {Rom 8:38-39 NIV}

There is nothing left out of that list, is there? Everything is there -- demons and dark powers, black magic and angels, truth and error, death and life -- whether in this creation or any other creation. Paul takes everything in and says that nothing, no being or force, is capable of separating us from the love of Jesus Christ our Lord. So we love God when we say, "If God be for us, who can be against us?" We love God because of what he himself has done on our behalf, and the nature of that commitment is that he loves us. Nothing can separate us from that.

This is the highest point of the letter. Obviously, Paul cannot go beyond this, and neither can we. What can you say? What can you do but love when you are confronted by a God like that?

I want to close by reading a modern version of this verse put in the terms of a specific individual, Ruth Harms Calkin, who wrote:

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.

Can you add anything to that?

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