

GOD IS FOR US

by Steve Zeisler

I have a friend who was married not long ago to a man she had been acquainted with in high school. The man was very shy. The woman had a lot of personality, vivaciousness and energy.

After graduating from high school, she had many problems---she took drugs for awhile, got married at least once, had children by a couple of different men, and raged her way through life. She eventually came to Christ.

She went to her twentieth high school reunion and there met the man she would later marry. He had been raised in a Christian home and had taken his faith seriously over the years since high school. They realized they were both Christians, began to develop a relationship, and eventually were married. Early in the course of their friendship, he told her, "I fell in love with you when I was sixteen. I have loved you and I have thought of you every day since." She was unaware, during twenty years of unhealthy relationships, that someone could love her.

What the end of the eighth chapter of the book of Romans says, to put it succinctly, is that God thinks of us every day. And not just every day, but every minute of every day. We fill his thoughts. He is enthusiastic about us and committed to us. Last week we saw that the Spirit prays for us with groanings too deep for words. The Spirit who indwells us speaks to the Father about us. His attention is completely on us; he prays in language that could never find human expression. As we go through the passage before us this week, we will see that the Lord God of the universe has thought about us before anything else was created. He knows everything that is true about us. He is bringing about our glorification. We will also find that when evil assails us the Lord Jesus intercedes for us, speaking to the throne of heaven on our behalf, defending us from accusation. In every expression of himself---Father, Son and Spirit---God cares for us.

Last week we considered the word "groaning." It occurred three times in the passage we studied: a sighing, a deep anguish that characterizes our age. We are told that if we are co-heirs with Christ, we must suffer with him. So it is appropriate to look at the hard things in our lives, to be honest about ourselves---in fact, to groan, wishing that things were different and better.

But this week we move on from thinking about our groanings, struggles and difficulties, to focus on the thinking of God about us. In this eighth chapter of Romans, which ends a marvelous section (Romans 6 through 8) in which the process of sanctification is laid before us, the final note that is sounded is the triumph that comes from knowing how deeply God cares for us. It is not our thoughts that are the last word, it is *his* thoughts that are the last word. It is having a heavenly perspective, not an earthly one. This is the great truth that underlies everything else.

THE LAST WORD

Romans 8, verses 28-30:

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. 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.

Romans 8:28 is one of the best loved and most often memorized verses in the Bible. There are three phrases in

this verse that we should attend to.

First, in all things God works for the good of his own. It is not just in the pleasant, delightful, anticipated things of our lives, not just in the beautiful sunsets and moving hymns, that we find God at work. In all things he works for our good.

That doesn't mean he works toward our short-term happiness or delight. He works towards what is best for us, doing what is eternally good in us and for us. But in all experiences of life, even the most difficult and painful, God is still at work doing something good.

The second phrase we should attend to here is that God works good in all things to those who love him. You can't make a deal with God. You can't say, "I'll be very attentive, I'll give you ten percent of my money, I'll shake hands with people I don't like, I'll memorize boring Bible verses. Here's how much I'll give if you'll give me good in return."

It has absolutely nothing to do with bartering. You may remember the story of Simon Magus in the book of Acts, who saw the power of the Holy Spirit resident within Peter and other apostles, and wanted it too. He offered them money, wanting to make a deal to have spiritual power for himself. Peter said, "May you perish with your money, thinking you could buy the gift of God."

It is those of us who love him in whom he works good: those who have already given their hearts away; who have been persuaded that he is worthy, kind, merciful and gracious; and who fall in love with him for himself before receiving all that he will give.

The second qualifier, and the third phrase we must attend to, is that we realize that it is *his* purpose that defines what good is. We're called according to his purpose, which is to make us like Christ. He has one Son, but he intends to have many more, men and women who qualify as sons. All that is true of Christ Jesus---his character, glory, love and authority---becomes true of us. We are made like him. That is God's purpose and that is what good is.

For those who love him, who are on the way to becoming what he intends them to be, who are called according to his purpose, in all their experiences God will work to bring about what is truly good. This is a remarkable promise.

Instead of facing life fearfully, caving in and pulling the covers over our head, crying out, frightened of what we have to experience, we know that the Sovereign of the universe is doing what is best for us.

THE PROCESS

Verses 29 and 30 show us the process: "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."

To begin with, these verses speak of the foreknowledge of God. In Ephesians we're told that before the foundation of the world, before anything was made, before time itself existed, he looked down the corridors of time and saw us. He knew everything that is true of us. Jesus says that every single hair on our heads is numbered.

My friend was told by the man she later married, "I have thought of you every day. Over all the years of your life when you thought no one cared for you and you never believed you were in the thoughts of anyone, I thought of you every day for all those years."

God thought of us before he even created us, and we have filled his thinking ever since. Everything that is true of us matters to him. Those whom he foreknew he intended for greatness. Those whom he knew ahead of time and now thinks of all the time, he also determined to make into something great: We should be like Christ. That is our destiny, the choice he has made for us: not just that we'll merely get by or survive, but that we will

be made into sons and daughters of the Sovereign of the universe.

"For those God foreknew he also predestined...And those he predestined, he also called...." He doesn't ravage or dominate. He invites; he calls us who will hear him into a relationship with him. Just as my friend finally responded to the man who had cared for her for years, so are we given the opportunity to respond to the love of God for us.

Those who respond to the call are cleansed. That's what justification means. We have been justified, fixed and cleansed from all of the sins that we would otherwise be guilty of, all of the laws that we have broken. And the very end of the process is glorification, the finished course, being like Christ as we were intended to be.

This is the mind of the Lord for us. We fill his thinking. There is nothing true of us that he doesn't know or embrace. There are no days in which we are not his deepest concern. We groan when we look at ourselves and at the world. We still have territory to get across and suffering to undergo. But God is absolutely committed to us, and what he determines cannot fail to be accomplished.

OUR HYMNS OF PRAISE

Verse 31 takes up an important question. Paul has asked this question four times in this section of Romans (6:1; 6:15; 7:7; 8:31):

What, then, shall we say in response to this?

At various points in his explanation of what it means to have Christ formed in us, he asks, What conclusion should we draw? Or, if this is really true, what difference should it make to us? What should be our response?

Paul goes on to write a magnificent hymn of praise to God, saying what it means to him to know that he is in the mind of his Father every minute of every day, and that he is cared for by the triune God. It is one of the most powerful written statements of any kind anywhere in the world. Verses 31-39:

If God is for us, who can be against us? 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? 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. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? 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 day long;
we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered."

No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. 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, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

What shall we say to these things? The world in all its hardship, deprivation and agony cannot separate me from the love of God. It cannot ruin what God intends for me. No created thing in this world will destroy, alter, or weaken the love of Christ.

What shall we say? What is it like to live knowing God loves you this way? What is it like to walk around in your shoes, in your world, your circumstances? Do you believe it enough that you can say it in your own words? Or, if words are hard for you, can you take Paul's words and personalize them so they belong to you?

Janna Sanders of our body showed me some marvelous psalms that she has written recently. As a

congregation we have sung a number of hymns that Bill Connor and Glenn Pickett have written together, reflecting deep, powerful, wise theology, expressing in their own words what it means to them to know that God loves them. Many of you write in journals, or find other ways of taking the truth seriously, applying it to yourselves and making it your own.

What shall you say to these things?

THE SHEPHERD'S SONG

Let me compare the verses here with another well-known passage of Scripture that will show that men and women in generation after generation have been writing of the love of God, putting it in their own words.

David the King wrote the twenty-third Psalm based on his experience as a shepherd. He grew up raising sheep, and wrote of the streams, pastures and valleys that he experienced, and hence was able to write of the shepherd care of God.

Paul wrote as an apostle

in the Roman era of the first century; he wrote about swords, travels and dangers, the experiences in his world that were true of him at some time in his life. What David wrote was true of him. And you and I can write what is true of us, or take another person's writings and personalize them to make them true for us.

The theme that is here in verse 31 is: If God is for us, who can be against us? David wrote in Psalm 23:1:

The Lord is my shepherd....

It is exactly the same point. David writes of himself as a sheep. Sheep are horrible at caring for themselves, absolutely defenseless, in danger from everything. But David writes that there is nothing to be afraid of, because he has a great defender who cares for him and is capable of defending him against everything. No enemy can assail him or defeat him. And that's the point that Paul makes here. If God is for us, who can be against us? Who can ruin you or me? Who can undermine and destroy if God is for us, if the Lord is our shepherd?

Verse 32 says, "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?" In writing the shepherd's Psalm, David said in verse 1:

...I shall not be in want.

There's nothing that I need in this life, and no longing placed in me by God that will go unmet. There is no requirement for success as a child of God that I will not be given. And Paul says it is impossible to conclude that the one who gave us his Son will not freely give us everything else as well.

It is true that God will teach us to want different things than we want right now. Things that we think are critically essential, that we can't possibly live without, may turn out to be things that we can very easily live without. And we have not yet learned that lesson. Those who will walk with him till the end of their lives will look back and say thank you for the hard things that turned them into the person they needed to be. If God will give us his Son, he won't withhold from us anything else we need.

Verse 33 says, "Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen?" God justifies. Christ died for us, was raised again, and is at the right hand of God interceding for us. Whose voice of condemnation is going to be raised against us? Who will say of us that we are evil, unrighteous, wicked, unholy or unworthy? Jesus died for us, and God has forgiven us. There is no condemnation.

David wrote in the shepherd's Psalm the same truth (Psalm 23:4):

Even though I walk
through the valley of the shadow of death,
I will fear no evil....

Evil has no right any more to attach itself to me, to command me, or drag me down. I will not be owned by evil. And Paul is saying Christ has justified us, and has interceded for us, so do not fear evil.

We will not go through life without the things we need; we will not go through life unforgiven, condemned, accused or overtaken by evil.

Verses 35 through 39 are ringing, glorious poetry. Name the thing that will separate us from the love of Christ. Trouble? Hardship? Persecution? Famine? Nakedness? Danger? Sword? We are put to death all day long for his sake. Does that separate us from his love? It does not. We are considered as sheep to be slaughtered, and we are conquerors in spite of these things. Neither death, life, angels, demons, the present, the future, powers, height, depth, nor any other thing in all creation can separate us from the love of Christ.

David drew the same conclusion a thousand years before, writing in shepherd's language of a shepherd's life, knowing that God loved him as well. Psalm 23:6:

Surely goodness and love will follow [chase after] me
all the days of my life,
and I will dwell in the house of the Lord
forever.

I will never be separated from him.

What shall we say then? Shall we use the language of the New Testament? The language of the Roman Empire? We think with Paul of the days that he was at sea, in jail, beaten, threatened, stoned, accused, abandoned. Shall we use his language and say, "God has never once separated himself from me; the love of Christ is greater than all of that"?

Shall we use David's language?

"The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not be in want...
I will fear no evil...
I will dwell in the house of the Lord
forever."

We have language of our own. And we can be as certain as the king and the apostle were that even though we groan, suffer, and fail, the last word in the sanctification process is that God thinks about us every day. He is determined to make us like Christ. Nothing will keep him from doing what he intends to do. He intends to have many children. He intends that Christ, our older brother, will be the model that stamps us and makes us like him. He has brought one Son to glory and many more are to follow.

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