

The Ultimate Promise (Part 4): Romans 8:28

Introduction: Please open your Bible to Romans 8:28.

Greg Boyd is a theologian and a pastor in St. Paul, MN (Woodland Hills Church). In one of his books he tells the story of a young woman who felt very strongly that God had called her to be a missionary. She met a man who shared the same calling of being a missionary. And after much prayer and godly counsel she felt led to marry this man. But later on this man turned out to be an adulterer. When she found out about her husband's affair he was deeply sorry. So she forgave him. But a few months later he went back to the other woman. And this time he was not sorry. In fact, he blamed his wife for not fulfilling his needs. One week before she found out he had filed for divorce she discovered that she was pregnant with his child. And so here she was, a divorced single mom whose life was completely turned upside down and whose hopes of being a missionary were completely dashed.

Her pastor was Greg Boyd. And one Sunday after he preached a message on suffering she asked him why God would allow her to marry this man and it turn out so awful. Greg Boyd responded by saying that **God was just as surprised as she was by the outcome**. He assured her that God had led her to marry that man. And at the time God thought he would be a good husband. But God didn't know what that man would do in the future. So his adultery was as much of a surprise to God as it was to the wife.

Now, how could Greg Boyd give such terrible pastoral advice? The answer is because Greg Boyd holds to a certain view of God called **Open Theism (Freewill Theism)**. Open Theism is a relatively new view of God that has emerged in conservative, evangelical circles over the last few decades that **attempts to explain the relationship between the sovereignty of God the free will of man**. As the name Freewill Theism suggests, the priority of this view is to promote the freewill of man. But it goes so far in doing so that **it redefines the nature of God** by denying the omniscience of God.

According to Open Theism, **the future is open to God**. While God has **exhaustive knowledge** of the **past** and the **present**, God does not have exhaustive knowledge of the **future**. There are many things about the future that God simply does not know such as **human freewill decisions**. In this way, the future is open to God rather than closed.

Clark Pinnock, "It is obvious that a future free decision cannot be known ahead of time by God or anyone else... God is omniscient in the sense that He knows everything which can be known. God can surmise what you will do next Friday but He cannot know it for certain because you have not done it yet."

Here is the **argument** of Open Theism:

1. The first major premise: Human beings are truly free (i.e. libertarian freewill, not compatibilism).
2. The second major premise: If God has exhaustive knowledge of the future including our freewill decisions, then our decisions are fixed. And if our decisions are fixed, then we cannot do

otherwise, thus we are not free.

3. The conclusion: God knows everything that can possibly be known. But since future freewill decisions have not yet been made, it is not possible for God to know what decisions we will make. Therefore, the future is open to God, rather than closed/fixed/determined.

John Sanders, “Given the depth and breadth of God’s knowledge of the present situation, God forecasts what he thinks will happen. In this regard God is the consummate social scientist predicting what will happen. God’s ability to predict the future in this way is far more accurate than any human forecaster’s, however, since God has exhaustive access to all past and present knowledge.”

God is a really good forecaster. But He truly does not know what any of us will do in the future. According to Open Theism God **grows**. God **discovers** and **learns things** that He did not know. God is even **surprised** by things including when Adam and Eve sinned.

Let me be as direct as I can: The god of Open Theism is not the God of the Bible. Let me give you **three biblical arguments** against Open Theism:

1. The trial of the false gods.

Isaiah 40-48 contains some of the greatest statements in the Bible on the incomparability of God. And one of the many subjects that is addressed in this section is **idolatry**. God puts the pagan gods on trial and He calls them to demonstrate their deity by declaring the future (**Isa. 41:21-23**). The test for determining deity is knowing the future. God alone has the unique ability to know the future. Thus He is the only true God (**Isa. 42:8-9; 45:21-22**). The god of Open Theism is not the God of Isaiah.

2. Prophecy.

God not only has the unique ability to know the future, He also has the unique ability to **foretell future events**. Not because He is a good forecaster, but because He is **omniscient** and has **exhaustive knowledge of every single future event**. Let me give you one example (**Isa. 44:28**). Who is Cyrus? He was the future King of the Medo-Persian Empire. He is the one whom God would use to restore the Jews back to their land from captivity. Now listen carefully, this prophecy was given more than 100 years before Cyrus was born.

Bruce Ware, “Consider the vast array of attending circumstances God must know about in advance for this prediction to be given. At the time Isaiah prophesies this, God must already know about the fall of Assyria, the rise and fall of Babylon, the rise of Medo-Persia, the fall of Israel, the fall of Judah, the birth and naming of Cyrus, the life and growth of this particular king, his ongoing life into adulthood, his selection as king, his willingness to consider helping the Israelites, his decision to assist in rebuilding Jerusalem, and on and on. This list hits a very few of the most significant items. Within each of these items is hidden a multitude of free will choices that would affect everything about the outcome for that particular piece of human history. It simply is incredible that God can say through Isaiah such a long time prior to Cyrus’s reign, ‘It is I who says of Cyrus, He is my shepherd! And he will perform all my desire.’”

Now, let’s distinguish **three views** regarding God’s knowledge of the future:

a. Traditional Arminianism: God knows what will happen in the future because He can foresee what will happen.

b. Open Theism (Neo Arminianism): God does not know what will happen in the future in terms of people's freewill choices.

c. Calvinism (Biblicism): God knows what will happen in the future because He foreordained every detail of history. God exhaustively knows the future, not merely because He can foresee the future, but because He has planned the future (**Isa. 46:8-11**).

In **v. 10** we see that God has **a purpose** in all that He does. And this purpose encompasses everything from the end to the beginning. We see God's purpose again stated in **v. 11**. Also in **v. 11** we see that God has **a plan** that He is accomplishing in the world.

Another way of saying this is **God's decree**. The decree of God is His **one, single, overall master plan for all things**. We see this idea of God's decree in **Romans 8:28** when Paul refers to God's people as "those who are called according to His purpose."

There are **five qualities** of God's decree according to the Bible:

a. God's decree is eternal (Ps. 139:16; Eph. 3:11).

The decree of God **originates in eternity in the mind of God** and God alone. God's decree is not being made up as He goes along because it was determined in eternity. So God's decree is **eternal**.

b. God's decree is comprehensive (Eph. 1:9-11).

What is included in God's decree? Everything. God has decreed whatsoever comes to pass including all the freewill actions of people. So God's decree is **comprehensive**.

c. God's decree is wise (Rom. 11:33-36).

God's decree is **not arbitrary or capricious**. Rather God's decree is **founded upon His infinite and perfect wisdom**. God does all things well according to His infinite wisdom including the formulation of His eternal decree. So God's decree is **wise**.

d. God's decree is sovereign (Ps. 115:3; 2 Tim. 1:9).

God's decree was **not influenced** by anything other than Himself. Nothing outside of God influenced Him to decree what He decreed. God is free to do whatever He pleases including the establishment of His decree. So God's decree is **sovereign**.

e. God's decree is immutable (Ps. 33:11; Prov. 19:21).

God's decree is **unalterable and unchangeable**. God's decree is **certain and secure**. God's decree **cannot fail!** Whatever God has ordained in eternity will certainly come to pass without fail. The decree of God **cannot be hindered or thwarted** even in the slightest degree. God has one decree and **only one decree**. God has **no contingency plan**. God has **no alternate plan** in case something goes wrong with His original plan. God has a **Plan A** and only a Plan A because His Plan A is immutable and unalterable.

In **summary**: God has a comprehensive master plan that was determined in eternity past, is founded upon His infinite wisdom, is based upon His own sovereign free will, and cannot be thwarted.

And nowhere is the decree of God seen more clearly than in the life and death of the Lord Jesus Christ. Before the foundation of the world God ordained that Christ would be slain for sinners (cf. Rev. 13:8; 17:8).

That brings us to the third reason why the god of Open Theism is not the God of the Bible. Because of...

3. The crucifixion of Christ.

Beloved, our discussion on Open Theism is **not an esoteric or abstract debate** that has no bearing on your life. This has **massive implications** for **how you think about God** and **how you live the Christian life**. One of the many tragedies of Open Theism is that **it eliminates our assurance in God**.

Greg Boyd, “It is true that according to the open view things can happen in our lives that God didn’t plan or even foreknow with certainty (though he always foreknew they were possible). This means that in the open view things can happen to us that have no overarching divine purpose. In this view, ‘trusting in God’ provides *no assurance* that everything that happens to us will reflect his divine purposes, for there are other agents who also have power to affect us, just as we have power to affect others. This, it must be admitted, can for some be a scary thought.”

If Open Theism is true, then **God is not sovereign**. If Open Theism is true, then **God cannot be trusted**. God can only be trusted if He is sovereign. And if God is sovereign, He is not a little bit sovereign or sovereign over some things but not other things. God is either sovereign over all things or He is not sovereign at all. If Open Theism is true, then **Romans 8:28** cannot be true. But I have good news: The god of Open Theism is not the God of **Romans 8:28**. The God of **Romans 8:28** is sovereign over all things and is completely trustworthy.

Proposition: At this point in our study of **Romans 8:28** we are looking at the **third part** of God’s promise which is...

I. The Certainty of God’s Promise.

II. The Comprehensiveness of God’s Promise.

III. The Content of God’s Promise.

“God causes all things to work together for good”

According to this part of the promise, we learn that **God is continuously at work** in the world. God is **not a passive spectator** in His creation. No, He is **always working** in the world and **the scope of His work** includes “all things.” What is more, God is always working on behalf of His people for our good. What is God doing right now? He is actively working all things together for your good.

As we have said before **Romans 8:28** underscores the sovereignty of God in a profound way. When Paul says that “God causes all things to work together for good” that is another way of

saying that God is absolutely sovereign over all things. Another way to describe the promise of **Romans 8:28** is in terms of **divine providence**.

And I remind you that there are **three aspects of providence**:

1. Preservation: God actively preserves the world He has made.
2. Government: God actively governs the world He has made.
3. Concurrence: God's providence is meticulous in that it includes every single detail and yet, at the same time, we are free creatures who make free decisions. God is sovereign and we are free to make decisions.

In our last message we saw how this was true in the life of **Joseph**. According to the book of **Genesis**, it was **Joseph's brothers** who maliciously sold him as a slave to Egypt. But the book of **Genesis** also tells us that it was **God** who sent Joseph to Egypt (Gen. 45:5, 7, 8). In His amazing providence, God so ordered all the events of Joseph's life that what his brothers meant for evil, God used it for good (Gen. 50:15-18, 19-21). The story of Joseph is the classic OT illustration of **Romans 8:28**.

But as amazing as the story of Joseph is, the greatest illustration and example of **Romans 8:28** is **the crucifixion of Jesus**. The crucifixion of Jesus is, by far, **the single greatest act of evil and injustice** in the history of the world. The murder of Jesus is **the greatest crime ever committed by man**.

With that said, who killed Jesus?

Well, there were **many actors involved**:

1. **Judas** betrayed Jesus (Matt. 26:14-16, 47-56).
2. The **devil** put it into Judas' heart to betray Jesus (John 13:2, 27).
3. Jesus was tried by **Annas the high priest** (John 18:12-14, 19-23).
4. Jesus was then tried by **Caiaphas the high priest** and the **Sanhedrin** (Matt. 26:57-68).
5. After the Sanhedrin condemned Jesus to death they sent Him to **Pilate** the Roman governor for execution (Matt. 27:1-2, 11-14).
6. Pilate then sent Jesus to appear before **Herod Antipas** (Luke 23:6-12).
7. Herod Antipas then sent Jesus **back to Pilate** (Matt. 27:15-26).
8. When given a choice by Pilate to let one criminal go free, either Barabbas or Jesus, **the Jewish crowd** cried out for Jesus to be crucified (Matt. 27:15-26).
9. And then finally **the Roman soldiers** nailed Jesus to the cross where He suffered, bled, and died (Matt. 27:27-34).

So who killed Jesus? There is **plenty of blame to go around**: Judas, the devil, Annas, Caiaphas, the Sanhedrin, Pilate, Herod, the Jewish crowd, and the Roman soldiers. Now, I want you to imagine all the freewill decisions of everyone who was involved in the murder of Jesus. There were millions of them.

But well before the cross, Jesus knew and even foretold what would happen to Him in the future (**Matt. 16:21**). According to Jesus, the future was not open. It was known to Him with certainty because it was determined by God (“He must go to Jerusalem”). This was God’s decree.

Luke 22:22

The death of Jesus was sovereignly **determined by God**. And God determined that the death of Jesus would come about through the betrayal of Judas. The future freewill actions of Judas were known and determined by God. But does God’s determination absolve Judas of guilt? No. He acted freely and is condemned for his actions. Right now Judas is perishing. And it’s his fault.

But what if Judas changed his mind and decided not to betray Jesus?

What if the devil decided not to put it into Judas’s heart to betray Jesus?

What if the Jewish court chose not to condemn Jesus?

What if the Roman court chose not to execute Jesus?

What if the Jewish crowd cried out for Barabbas to be crucified instead of Jesus?

What if the Roman soldiers refused to carry out their orders to crucify Jesus?

In the world of Open Theism all of these things were possible. Not even God knew what these people would do.

John Frame, “If God has really left the future completely open, he has left open the possibility of Satan’s victory.”

But the future is not open. It is determined by God.

To further solidify this point let’s look at two more passages on the crucifixion of Jesus in the book of **Acts**...

Acts 2:22-23

The death of Jesus on the cross is God’s predetermined plan. When godless men put Jesus to death, they acted freely. They nailed Him to a cross. They put Him to death. They acted freely. And yet, what they did fulfilled God’s predetermined plan (cf. Luke 7:30; 9:21-22, 44-45; 13:33; 17:25; 18:31-33; 22:37; 24:26-27, 46-47; Acts 3:18; 4:28; 5:38; 10:42; 13:27; 17:26, 31; 20:27; 26:23).

J.C. Ryle, “The wickedest enemies of God are only axes and saws and hammers in his hands, and are ignorantly his instruments for doing his work in the world.”

A.W. Pink, “God is working out his eternal purpose, not only in spite of human and satanic opposition, but by means of them.”

Does God’s sovereign predetermination absolve the murderers of Jesus from guilt? No (Acts 2:36-38, 41).

Acts 4:27-28

Again, the crucifixion of Jesus involved the free actions of multiple people. And yet all of them did exactly what God predestined them to do. This is the concurrence aspect of providence.

And as we view these things through the lens of **Romans 8:28**, God caused many evil things by many evil people to work for good.

What **Judas** did for money, God used for good.

What the **devil** did for hatred of Jesus, God used for good.

What the **Jewish leaders** did out of envy, God used for good.

What **Pilate** did out of political pressure and the fear of man, God used for good.

What the **Roman soldiers** did in executing an innocent man, God used for good.

Collectively, these people committed the single greatest crime and act of injustice in the history of the world. And yet what they meant for evil, God meant for good. And not just good, but the greatest good, our eternal salvation in Christ.

Now listen, if God is able to cause the evil actions of Judas, the devil, the Jewish leaders, and the Romans to work for good, then He is able to cause all things to work together for good in your life. The argument is **from the greater to the lesser**. If God is able to cause the worst evil ever committed in the world to work for good, then He is able to cause lesser evils to work together for your good.

Conclusion: *All Things For God* (by Thomas Watson): Chapter Three: Why All Things Work For Good.

Thomas Watson, “The grand reason why all things work for good is the near and dear interest which God has in His people.”

Why does God cause all things to work for your good? Because God loves you.

Thomas Watson, “The most dark, cloudy providences of God have some sunshine in them. What a blessed condition is a true believer in! When he dies, he goes to God; and while he lives, everything shall do him good. Affliction is for his good. What hurt does the fire to the gold? It only purifies it.”

Thomas Watson, “God’s ways are ‘past finding out’ (Rom. 11:33). They are rather to be admired than fathomed. There is never a providence of God, but has either a mercy or a wonder in it. How stupendous and infinite is that wisdom, that makes the most adverse dispensations work for the good of His children!”