

Romans 8 (28) – The Missing Link

Romans 8:28-30 is often called “the golden chain of redemption”. In these verses, you see God’s process of salvation for Christians. This includes God’s foreknowledge, meaning his foreloving of Christians. God chooses believers to be part of his saving plan. And then you see God’s predestinated plan for Christians, and God’s calling, justification, and glorification of Christians. This is the absolutely unbreakable chain of events that redeems God’s people in Jesus Christ.

However, some people think there is a missing link to this chain. They think the chain is, or can be, broken. They see justification, which is your being declared righteous before God. And they see glorification, which is your eternal state of perfection before God. But what about sanctification? This is your growth in God’s grace, which starts with justification, and ends with glorification. It is the absolutely necessary byproduct of justification, and the absolutely necessary path between justification and glorification. Romans 6:22 says that God’s plan *leads to sanctification and its end, eternal life*. A saving faith leads to a living faith. Sanctification is an absolutely necessary link in the redemptive plan of God. You don’t get to heaven without it.

But if this is so, then where is this critical link in this golden chain?

Well, it is right there in the text. Look at vs.29 – *For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son*. There it is – *conformed to the image of his Son*. That is how God is working to your good, and how he defines the good he is doing on your behalf. What the world calls good, or what you think is good, may not actually be good according to God’s purpose for you. But God is working all things together for your good, for what he calls good, which means to be made more like Jesus.

Sanctification is the process of progressively becoming more like Jesus, more clearly reflecting and radiating his character in and through your life. This is a big part of what this passage is all about. Those that are part of God’s predestined plan of redemption will be in the process of sanctification in this life. There is no getting around it; sanctification is part of the unbreakable chain of redemption.

Now, some might object, saying that this *predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son* is talking about how Christians will be fully sanctified, that is, fully made like Jesus, when they are glorified. When Jesus returns. And I agree with that. But it also means more than that. Paul isn’t just saying that God is working out the return of Jesus so that when he comes again, believers will be made like him then. Now, he is saying that. As 1 John 3:2 says – *Beloved, we are God’s children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared;*

but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is. Christians will be fully made like Jesus when he returns. But Paul is also saying more than that. He is saying that God works all things together right now to conform you to Christ as you move along in this life, before he returns.

Paul says, *“all things work”*, and that word “work” here is a present tense verb. All things are presently working to conform you into the image of Christ. Full sanctification, as in full holiness, this won’t happen fully in this life, as 1 John 3:2 says. But as 1 John 3:3 says – *And everyone who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure.* And that is not an imperative, a command to do it. It is an indicative, a picture of it happening. Sanctification necessarily follows justification. When you get saved, you start becoming more like Jesus. If you are a Christian, sanctification is happening right now in your life at this moment and every moment thereafter.

Now you might object here as well. You think, how come this isn’t actually happening in my life right now? If I’m honest, I’m going backward, not forward. And I say to you that your sanctification IS happening, but it isn’t always in a forward moving, linear motion. The process looks different for different people. And the process will look different for you according to the choices you make.

So, here is your dilemma, your personal “missing link”, as it were. You might not think this passage is true for you, that it doesn’t apply in your case. That sanctification isn’t happening to you right now. You think it only applies with things you suffer through no fault of your own. And you think it doesn’t apply with things you brought on yourself. So, you don’t think your difficult situation actually is part of God’s plan, or you don’t think God will actually use it on your behalf. But God is using it, and you have a part in it. A part that can change the course of how a difficult situation you’re in, or a sinful season you caused, is used by God in your life.

So, now, let me begin to explain how this works...

As you have seen in this passage, God is working all things together for your good, which is defined by God as being conformed to the image of Jesus. And the context of Romans 8:28-30 involves suffering, and the issues and troubles of this life, which you see before and after vs.28-30, in vs.16-18 and vs.35-39, for example. The whole chapter is about it, basically. And the point Paul is making is that you can trust God even in the midst of suffering because he is God, and he has a good plan for your life. Trusting God doesn’t mean hoping for the absence of pain, or seeking the presence of pain, but believing in the purpose of pain. Understanding that enables you to focus your trust on God’s goodness, sovereignty, and love for you through purposeful pain.

This is from William Cowper's hymn *God Moves in a Mysterious Way*:

*His purposes will ripen fast
Unfolding every hour
The bud may have a bitter taste
But sweet will be the flower
Ye fearful saints, fresh courage take
The clouds ye so much dread
Are big with mercy and shall break
In blessings on your head
Judge not the Lord by feeble sense
But trust Him for His grace
Behind a frowning providence
He hides a smiling face*

God is truly, and fully, working all things at all times. This is known as providence. And God's providence is an effect of God's sovereignty. God's sovereignty is his all-encompassing, all-inclusive power. And God's providence is his all-inclusive, all-pervasive purpose. God's sovereignty is about his power. God's providence is about the exercise of his power.

God is always at work, even when things don't work out as you had hoped or planned. Someone explained it like this: "There's a wedding that's going to happen somewhere tomorrow and there's a bride who's praying for sunshine, and there's a farmer who's praying for rain". "And if it rains it doesn't mean he doesn't like the bride ... He's just up to different stuff at different times."

No matter what it is, whether it is some sort of suffering, or persecution, or loss, or pain, problems, or as a result of your own sin, God is using this difficult situation as part of God's providential sanctification for your life. And you can respond in godly ways to it, thereby advancing in holiness. Or you can respond in ungodly ways, thereby hindering your holiness. If you respond to the difficult situation in ungodly ways, then you will be feeling the weight of your personal sin because of it. And then, at some point, when that weight gets to be too much for you, you will finally turn to God in repentance, which will then advance you in holiness. And then at some point, you will experience a similarly difficult situation, and either move forward, or circle back around in that repentance cycle. In any event, it is all part of God's providential sanctification of you.

Let me say it this way. If you get it right, you move on. If you get it wrong, you circle back around. In both cases, you may experience another similarly difficult situation,

and then you will see and feel how you've grown, as you respond again in godly ways, or you will see and feel how you still need to turn to God more fully. In each and every case, in each and every situation, in each and every season, God is using it, working all things together for your good and his glory.

Sanctification isn't just achieved in those "heroic moments". It is in everything. Everything counts, because God is using everything. People think they are shaped mostly by the extraordinary things, the crisis times, the big events, the "I was moved" moments. But here, in this text, you can see that God is shaping you through all of it, through the exciting things, and the ordinary things, and even the painful things.

Your responses to life, your godly or ungodly reactions, responses, and repentance, in good times, in bad times, in easy times, in hard times, in everything, at all times, these are what guide your growth in grace. God shapes Christians, and Christians can help or hinder their forward movement in God's grace, but you need to realize that sanctification is more process oriented than crisis oriented. It is more about the continuing movement rather than a specific moment.

The awesome and wonderful news is that if God has called you, in other words, if you have repented toward God, asking him to forgive your sins, and placed your faith in Jesus Christ, in his work, living a sinless life and dying on a cross in your place, to pay for your sins, then you are a part of this plan. And God will work it to your good and his glory even when you mess things up. You can't change God's plan; you can only change how it's working in you. I pray you'll move forward in God's grace.

The benefits and blessings of moving forward are many. You become more like Jesus. You stop grieving the Holy Spirit. You start being filled by the Holy Spirit. You will experience a greater growth in grace. People will see how you are growing in grace. It increases and expands your witness for Christ. It multiplies your rewards in heaven.

Sanctification is worth the cost. And if you are a Christian, you are being sanctified, one way or another. But you have a choice in how that goes. Don't miss the missing link.