

**Romans 8:28-30** *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. <sup>29</sup>For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters. <sup>30</sup>And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified.*

Dear friends in Christ our Savior,

The story is told about three trees which grew up on a mountaintop. When those trees were saplings, each of them had their own dream about what they would be when they grew up. The first tree looked at the stars and said, "I want to hold treasure. I want to be covered with gold and filled with precious stones. I'll be the most beautiful treasure chest in the world." The 2<sup>nd</sup> tree looked at the small stream trickling nearby on its way to the ocean and said, "I want to travel mighty waters and carry powerful kings. I'll be the strongest ship in the world." The 3<sup>rd</sup> tree looked down in the valley below where busy men and women walked around in the busy town. He said, "I don't want to leave the mountain at all. I want to grow so tall that when people stop to look at me, they'll raise their eyes to heaven to think of God."

Many years passed and the little trees grew into adult trees. One day, the woodcutters climbed to the mountaintop and chopped down each of those trees. The first tree was excited when he was brought to the carpenter's shop, thinking surely his dream would come true. But the carpenter made him into a feed box for animals. Instead of being covered with gold and filled with treasure, he was coated with saw dust and filled with hay. The second tree smiled when he was taken to the shipyard. But instead of being made into a mighty ship he was fashioned into a simple fishing boat, too weak to sail on the ocean. The 3<sup>rd</sup> tree was disappointed at being cut down in the first place. He was even more disappointed when he was cut into beams and left in the lumberyard.

Much time passed and those trees all but forgot their dreams. But one night, the golden starlight poured over the 1<sup>st</sup> tree as a young woman placed her newborn baby into the feed box. "I wish I could make a cradle for him," she said to her husband. When shepherds and wise men came to worship this little baby as the Christ promised from God, the first tree realized that his dream had come true: he was holding the greatest treasure in the world.

One evening years later, a tired traveler and his friends got into a fishing boat. As the boat was going out into the lake, the traveler fell asleep. A great storm arose and everybody on board, including that second tree, was afraid they weren't going to make it. But the tired traveler awoke from his sleep and calmed the winds and the waves with just his word. The second tree realized he was carrying a great king—the king of heaven and earth.

On a Friday a few years later, the third tree was startled as his beams were yanked from the woodpile. He flinched as he was carried through the streets with an angry crowd shouting at the man who carried him. He shuddered when the soldiers nailed a man's hands and feet to him. He felt angry and ashamed. But when he realized who was nailed to him, he knew then that every time anyone looked at him, they would be reminded of God.

Does any part of this sound familiar to you? Have you ever made plans for your life that have turned out exactly the opposite of the way you wanted them too? Or maybe your plan turned out but with a much different outcome than you expected. Things don't always work out the way we want them to. What are some of the setbacks and difficulties which you have encountered as you tried to carry out the plan you wanted for this life? How have those setbacks caused your life to take a much different turn than what you thought or wanted it to go? It is interesting to look back at our lives and see how much God's plan for our lives differs from our plan for our lives. When I was growing up, I always said there were two things I was never going to do when I grew up: be a pastor and join the army. I ended up doing both! My life took a much different path than what I thought it would take growing up. Yet God has worked it out to accomplish his purposes.

He has done the same for you. When setbacks and the problems of life cause us to change our plans and take different paths for our lives, we often wonder what God has in mind for us. We question God's path and at times we may even accuse God of leaving or forsaking us. Today, Paul gives us a promise from God to lean upon during these times of setbacks and problems. He takes our focus off of the setbacks and difficulties and refocuses our attention on the promises God makes to us. He reminds us that God has a plan for us. God not only knows you but he has a plan for you and he uses everything in your life, including the trials, challenges and setbacks, to accomplish that plan in your life. Trusting that God has a plan for everything which we face in life gives us hope and comfort even when all the outward signs might say otherwise. Knowing that we are safe in God's hands and trusting that God has a plan for us helps us see God's love in everything we face in life. So Paul encourages us: **See the Good in All Things.**

When you're in a bad mood, you are not usually appreciative of a peppy person telling you to look on the bright side that everything will be all right. It's really hard to see the good in anything when you are in the midst of a bad spell. So these words from Paul might be difficult for you to hear as you face the difficulties of life. I remember a person responding to me when I shared this passage to her in the midst of a difficult time, "I knew that's what you are going to tell me but I don't want to hear this right now. I can't see what possible good God is going to bring from this situation!" Yet, the person who is sharing this information is the Apostle Paul under inspiration by the Holy Spirit. And Paul has a good reason for telling us to see the good in every situation: God has a plan for you. This isn't just a quickly thought out plan or a plan that

God is developing for you on the fly. This is a plan God had for you from eternity. From eternity, from before the world began, God picked each one of you to be his children. Before he saw anything good in you, before he could give consideration to any good you had done, God chose you to be his child. He penciled you into the blueprint of his eternal kingdom and entered into a personal relationship with you before you were even you!

This is hard for us to comprehend. It's hard to even fathom how it could be possible. How could God know me and choose me before I even existed? It boggles the mind. Yet this is a wonderfully comforting concept. From eternity, God knew you, chose you and had a plan for you. That doesn't mean you and I are robots controlled by God in heaven. But it does mean that God can and will use whatever happens to us in this life to achieve his purpose for us. What is that purpose? To be like his Son. This is what gives us dignity and honor in everything we do. We are called to be like his Son. Paul tells us he *called us according to his purpose and predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son*. Our purpose is to serve, honor and glorify God in heaven with our lives the same way which Jesus did with his. Jesus' specific purpose was to be the Savior of the world. God doesn't have in mind for you and me to die for the sins of others. That was Jesus' mission. But our mission is to serve him with our lives in the same manner which Jesus served him with his. Our purpose is to glorify God as we live our lives each day. That means reflecting his love for us in our love for others. That means witnessing to him and making disciples as we share his love with others. This means loving God above all things and seeking to live our lives to honor him. That means trusting God to keep his promises and watch over us even when times are difficult and challenging. God gives each of us the opportunity to do that in different and unique ways in our individual lives, yet the purpose is the same. And we carry out that purpose knowing and trusting that God has a plan for us.

What's hard for us to understand then is this: if God has a plan for us to glorify him, why do troubles still come our way? Couldn't God achieve his purpose in us without letting troubles come our way? The easy answer is: yes, God could do this. But let's remember why these difficulties and troubles come our way. They come not because God is mean and sadistic, but because we are sinful people. These troubles come as effects and consequences of being sinful people living in a sinful world. We often forget this fact. We allow ourselves to think we are pretty good people and deserving of having good things happen to us. We are bombarded by this message throughout the media today: You are worth it! You deserve this! But the Bible tells just the opposite. Sin permeates our every thought, word and action. All of the grumbling about the things we have to face, all of the accusations against God for sending troubles into our lives, all of the moments of doubt and distrust of God are sin and evidence of a deeper problem: We are sinners who rebel against God and deserve only death because of them. That anything good happens to us is a gift of God's grace. We deserve for God to cast us from his sight forever in the fires of hell.

How thankful we are that part of God's plan for us was to send his Son, Jesus, to live a perfect life for us and take our sins upon himself on the cross. Jesus' death is a great example of the promise God makes to us in these verses. God used the greed of Judas which he didn't condone along with the selfishness, jealousy and lies of the Pharisees which he didn't condone along with the brutality of the Romans to bring about the sacrificial death of his Son for our sins. God worked through the evil done to Jesus to bring about our salvation. How awesome God's plans are! Then, out of his grace, God chose you and I to be recipients of this grace. In his plan, through the waters of baptism and the preaching of his Word, God has worked faith into our hearts and brought us into his family. He conformed us to the likeness of his son. That means when he sees us through faith in Jesus, he sees in us the perfection of Jesus. He sees people who are in the exact image of his son—pure, holy and blameless.

What a plan God has carried out in us to this point in our lives. But let's remember something even more: God's plan for us is an eternal plan. God not only planned for us to be his children here and made that plan to work out in our lives. His plan is for us to live with him eternally in heaven where we can glorify him eternally. As God worked his plan out in our lives to bring us to this point, we can trust he will continue to work out his plan, even amidst the trials and troubles that we face, to accomplish his plan for us and bring us to be with him eternally in heaven one day. Just listen as Paul lays out God's plan for us: *those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified*. Notice the tense used in the verbs of this plan. Those he justified (or declared not guilty in Jesus) he also glorified. It doesn't say he will glorify as if that will happen some day off in the future. He has glorified you. In God's eyes, this has already taken place. It is such a certain thing that God talks about it already having happened to you. It's already an accomplished fact that we will be glorified in heaven. How awesome that will be in heaven when we experience no more setbacks or problems. We will have no sin to separate us from God. We will live in God's presence in peace and joy for all eternity.

What peace and comfort we have knowing that this glorification is already an accomplished fact for us. That means the setbacks and problems we face can't take away the life we have with God in heaven. If it's God's plan to glorify us in heaven, this means he won't let the challenges of life derail us. God can use even the most wicked things of life to carry out his plan for us to serve and glorify him here and then to glorify us with him in heaven. We may not see the good which comes from every difficulty we face in life, but we trust God has a plan to work good in us through it. He has chosen you, called you and brought you to faith. He will see to it that no matter what you face, he will use it for your eternal good. Your life may not always go the way that you plan. There will be setbacks and detours and sometimes even U-turns which you have to take in life. But God has a plan for you—an eternal plan. He has a plan for your life here and for your eternity with him. Trust in him. Be confident in him. With your certainty in this promise, **See the Good in All Things**. Amen