

# Secure to be Christlike

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- [ 0 : 0 0 ] Well, do make sure that the Bible is open in front of you to Romans 8, verse 28 to 30, so that you can see that everything I say comes from the text of Scripture. And let us pray.
- Heavenly Father, we thank you again, and we just ask now that as we hear your word proclaimed, Lord, I pray that by your Spirit, you'll be working in us so that we can know you better and be secure in you.
- In the name of Jesus, we pray. Amen. I don't know about you, but one of the most difficult things for me during this current pandemic is having to deal with endless uncertainty.
- When can we reopen KEC for service? What will the latest government SOPs say? Will they change again? How many people will actually come? And what will happen if Kuching becomes a red zone again?
- Well, now you've gotten an answer to that. And of course, the bigger questions. How can we best disciple our people in an era of social distancing?
- [ 1 : 0 1 ] How can we help people to think as God wants us to think about giving and evangelism and how to live our whole lives for Jesus in a changed environment?
- How can we equip people to care for one another and be that community of truth and love? As one of the core convictions of our church says.
- These are just some of the questions that have kept me up at night over the past few months. And often I have to say, I just don't know.
- I'm sure you face your own version of such questions as well. Can my kids go to school? When will it reopen or close? What happens if a teacher gets infected?
- How are my kids' education going to proceed? Or maybe I'm planning to visit my parents in another state. But A-Asia keeps rescheduling and cancelling their flights.
- [ 2 : 0 0 ] And the quarantine requirements keep changing. How can I know when to go or even if to go? And what about the promised vaccine?
- Some people say it's nearly here. We can be optimistic. Others of us are more sceptical. It's still a long way away. And to these and many other questions, we just have to say, we just don't know.
- And Romans 8 has also been telling us what we don't know. We saw that last week, didn't we? Verse 26. We don't know what we ought to pray for.
- Many of us don't find it easy to pray even in the best of times. But when life gets overwhelming, it can be especially difficult to know what to say to God.
- We don't know what are the right words or what should be our request. We just don't know. And we don't know because we can't see.
- [ 3 : 1 0 ] That was implied in verse 24 last week, wasn't it? But hope that is seen is no hope at all.
- Paul is encouraging us towards hope. But in so doing, he is highlighting the fact that presently, we can't see. We can't see what God is up to.

We can't see why this world should be in this present mess. We don't have a neat explanation for what's going on. All we know is that, verse 22, the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time.

Not some of it, but all of it. And that strikes home, especially now, when it seems as if no corner of the world has been left untouched by the coronavirus.

And so although Paul encourages us towards hope, we find it difficult to do so. We just don't know. And when our lack of knowledge is combined with our weakness, we find it difficult to journey on.

[ 4 : 31 ] Did you notice that's how Paul describes our condition last week? Weakness. That's in verse 26. That's us. That's our condition.

Not weaknesses, plural, but weakness, singular. As if our entire being can be summed up in this one word.

And if COVID-19 has taught us one thing, it has taught us that that's true, isn't it? We're not strong. We're not solid. We're not stable.

And so we don't feel secure. But God knows this. And he doesn't look down on us for it.

He doesn't sneer at us and say, how stupid and useless you are for being weak. No. He helps us.

[ 5 : 30 ] We saw that last week too, didn't we? Verse 26. The Spirit helps us in our weakness. God knows. God sees.

And God helps. God knows. And by the Spirit, as my study Bible so beautifully puts it, he brings before God the prayer that perfectly matches God's will for us.

We groan. So he groans for us. And that's one thing God wants us to know. His Spirit helps us in our weakness.

If you can imagine two pillars that hold up a roof that shields us from the storm, verses 26 to 27 last week is one of those pillars that God has built for us.

And today, in verses 28 to 30, God is going to show us the other pillar. There are so many things we don't know.

[ 6 : 36 ] But what is one thing we can't know? Verse 28. 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.

This is the one thing we can be absolutely confident about. This is the one thing we can be 100% secure about. In a world full of uncertainty and insecurity, we know that in all things, God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.

What a big, big verse this is, isn't it? You know, there are some verses in the Bible where you think, you know, oh, if we don't have that verse, we wouldn't miss much. You know, like 1 Chronicles 1 verse 5, for example.

The sons of Japheth, Gomer, Magog, Madai, Javan, Tubal, Mesheh, and Tiraz. You know, if that was taken out, you probably wouldn't miss that. Although there must be a reason why God kept that in our Bibles.

But not Romans 8 verse 28. You know, if this was taken out, you'll definitely miss it. This verse is like one of those stone pillars which have supported large classical buildings for centuries.

[ 8 : 07 ] That's how God designed this verse, to bear a huge load. And so let's drill down into this particular verse and think more deeply about what we can know.

And I want us to reflect more on these three phrases from verse 28, that God works in all things for our good. God works in all things for our good.

So first, God works. You know, all throughout 8 verse 28 to 30, God is the subject. Grammar teachers will tell you that means he's the person performing the action.

That's what subject means. And when we remember who the person behind the action is, well, we'll be able to see why 8 verse 28 is such a strong pillar.

Now, back in Romans 1 verse 20, we're told that God's invisible qualities have been clearly seen. We should be able to see his eternal power and his divine nature.

[ 9 : 22 ] But too often, we take for granted who God as a person is. We just think that he's a bigger, more supercharged version of a human being.

But let's slow down and think about who God really is. And the first thing to remember is that God is uncreated.

He's the creator, not the creation. Now, what does that mean? It means that he is answerable to no one else.

He is above creation, not part of it. And therefore, there is absolutely nothing in creation that can have a hold on God.

You know, sometimes we talk about people being beholden to someone else. So, we might say that a politician is beholden or indebted to the group of people who help him get elected.

[ 10 : 24 ] Maybe a few prominent businessmen or something like that. And so, they can influence his decisions. He has to pander somewhat to their interests.

But not God. There is no circumstance, no event, and no person in the entire universe who can influence God in the way I've just described.

He's never pushed into doing things that he doesn't want to do. He simply acts according to his nature. But that's not the sum total of who he is because what is his nature?

Well, I think we can say at least two things. He is the fullness of love. After all, elsewhere in the Bible, as most of you know, God is described as love himself.

He is love personified. And he is also the fullness of life. Now, there are a number of places we can see this in the scriptures.

[ 11 : 33 ] But let me just point to you to Psalm 36, verse 9. It should be appearing on the screen. Where we discover that with God is the fountain of life.

In your light, we see light. He is the fullness of life. The fountain of life. The place where life and love overflows.

That's his nature. Now, think about it.

If this is God, love and life himself, and if he holds eternal power, as Romans 1.20 says, and if, as Romans 8.28 says, God works, well, what are we really saying?

When we say God works, we are saying we are seeing love in action. We are saying that we are seeing life in action. We are saying that God, the creator, God, the uncreated one, God, the one who is the fountain of love and life, is not just up there, twiddling his thumbs.

[ 12 : 57 ] He is down here, in the thick of it. Now, we've seen this already, haven't we, in Romans 8. He's been working. He's already granted us the verdict of no condemnation, of righteousness in Christ.

through his son, through his son, his work, in such a way, so that he can say to us, I no longer hold what you've done wrong against you.

We know God works because we can see Jesus in the flesh, in space and time, hung on an actual Roman cross.

It's not a fantasy story. There's historical evidence for God working. There is love in action. And then he's given us the spirit of life, the spirit who has raised Christ from the dead.

Well, that's no myth either. There's historical evidence for God working. It's called the empty tomb. And God grants to us the same resurrection life as well.

[ 14 : 13 ] You see, God is the fountain of life, and he bursts with such life that he cannot help but share that life with us. So there's life in action.

For those led by the spirit of God are the children of God. that are adopted and co-heirs with Christ. God, this God, this God of the Bible, this God who possesses this kind of divine nature, this God who gave Jesus is working.

That's what Romans 8.28 says. Second phrase. In all things.

God works in all things. Not in some things. Not in a few things. Not just in those things that make God look good.

God works in all things. That includes the present sufferings that he's just been talking about in verse 18. That includes the groanings that we have to express in verses 22 and 23 last week.

[ 15 : 38 ] Or look just a little ahead to the passage that we'll consider next week. In verse 32, we read, 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?

And what are all things being referenced here? Well, they include verse 35, trouble and hardship and persecution and famine and nakedness and danger and so on.

We will see that more clearly next week, I think, when we explore the logic of these verses. But God can work in them and through them.

And indeed, He is. And so verse 28 isn't a cautious verse.

Not at all. It's calling us to a big faith. Verse 28 says to us, You know that time when you got really sick and the doctors couldn't really tell what's wrong and then you got better for a while and then you had a relapse?

[ 16 : 54 ] God is working through that. You know that season where everything seemed to be going wrong one after another? You know, your friends let you down, work or study just got tougher and tougher and everything just felt like a mess.

God is working through that. You know those moments when loneliness just overwhelms you or disappointment just keeps poking at you and discouragement just won't let you go.

God is working in that. I guess normally in such moments we try to console ourselves and each other by saying, Oh, I hope that in all these things you know, hopefully it will kind of all turn out okay.

Well, God tells us to widen our horizons. He says, there's no random chance involved. I'm working in all these things.

I never take an off day and I certainly don't have a bad day. Every single millisecond, the little things, the bad things, even the sinful things and yes, even COVID-19.

[ 18 : 13 ] God is using and bringing it to conform to his master plan. He is not the author of evil but he is sovereign even over evil.

You see, verse 28 calls us to a big faith because it presents us with a big God. For here's the really big thing and it lies in the next phrase, for the good.

For the good. Well, let's make clear first of all what Romans 8.28 is not saying. Romans 8.28 doesn't say that bad things on its own are good.

Romans 8.28 isn't trying to tell you that the pain of cancer or chronic pain or mental illness is good in itself. Romans 8.28 isn't trying to tell you that being bad-mouthed or cheated or even being sexually assaulted is a good thing.

Romans 8.28 isn't there to say that sin that grieves God can be redefined as goodness. Certainly not. But Romans 8.28 is there to say that even through all these things God can bring about good.

[ 19 : 46 ] God is working in all things for our good. Now, what is the good that this verse is talking about?

If we only had this verse, we could be free to define good however we like. And it would be all too easy to take this good to mean something like a comfortable life or a well-off life.

But this verse doesn't occur in a vacuum. In the very next verse, verse 29, God gives us a clear definition of what he means by good.

To be conformed to the image of his son. That is God's purpose. That is God's master plan. That is why God is orchestrating every single thing, even the bad things.

All so that you and I can become more and more like Jesus. God's purpose. Now that is absolutely radical, isn't it?

[ 20 : 59 ] What do we normally think is good? Getting a satisfying job is good. Getting a job that is satisfying and well-paid is very good.

Getting a boyfriend or girlfriend is good. Getting a husband or wife is very good. Getting approval from that person, staying healthy, having well-adjusted and happy kids are all good.

But do we think of becoming more and more like Jesus as good? Necessary maybe? Obligatory maybe?

But good? Maybe that's not the first word that comes to mind. But this is God's master plan. It's like he's taking a piece of rough unchiseled stone and he's slowly and patiently chipping away at the stone, carving and polishing it until you get an absolute thing of beauty at the very end.

And you know what? Sometimes when he chips away at you, it will hurt. It hurts when you didn't get the thing that you were praying for.

[ 22 : 24 ] It hurts when you experience some injustice that doesn't get addressed. It hurts when you did something you regretted and you have to live with the consequences.

And yet, in all these, Romans 8, 28 is asking us to have faith and to say to God, God, whatever it is that you're doing, I know that you're using this experience somehow to shape me to be more and more like the most beautiful person in the universe, your son, Jesus.

Help me to be more open to that. And perhaps that painful experience causes you to be more thankful for what is certain and sure, like the mercy and love of Christ.

Perhaps the painful experience causes you to be more prayerful, turning your eyes to fix on Jesus. Perhaps that painful experience causes you to be more fruitful as you become gentler and more compassionate, patient, and perseverant.

Whatever it is, as the pastor Ray Galia puts it, we can trust God to be the master recycler. He recycles our pain and turns it into the fruit of the spirit for his glory.

[ 23 : 52 ] Nothing is wasted. For glory is where we're heading. You know, if you think of the good as a coin, then on one side of the coin, you can put the word conformity.

That is conformity to Christ. But on the other side of the coin, you can put the word glory. Notice the end of verse 30.

Those he justified, he also glorified. Now, it's hard to know what this means exactly, because the Bible doesn't go into great detail. But it seems as if the Bible is saying this about us.

you will be glorified. And what is glorification? Glorification basically is the opposite of the state of humiliation.

And remember Jesus? Even though he was humiliated, he was ultimately glorified. And in Christ, guess what?

[ 25 : 02 ] You're on the same track. You have the same destiny as Jesus. Whatever humiliation that you're going through now, God is working in all things for your good, to bring you to finish the race, so that you can enter glory.

But of course, the ultimate glory goes to Jesus. That's the point Paul is making at the end of verse 29. Jesus wants many brothers and sisters who will rule the world with him as co-heirs.

But he does so as the firstborn, which is the status of pre-eminence. God is working to conform you to be like Jesus in his glory, even as his glory will always shine the brightest.

And that is the good he is working for. But let me throw out a question that we haven't asked so far. Who is this promise for?

Who is this promise for? It's actually not a promise for everyone. I hope you see that. It's not something we can simply say to anyone going through a hard time.

[ 26 : 27 ] No, look at verse 28. It's for those who love him. In other words, it's for all those who have truly placed their trust in Jesus, who acknowledge with their lives that he is their saviour and lord.

How do we know that? Because those who love him in verse 28 are also those whom God foreknew and predestined to be conformed to his image, to the image of his son, verse 29.

They are clearly the same group of people. But of course, if you're not someone who trusts in Jesus today, well, we really want you to enjoy this promise too by coming to know Jesus.

And our Christianity Explored course is still open for anyone who wants to join in. But this wonderful promise is only for all who love God.

But I wonder if the way that Paul phrases it here, which admittedly is quite rare in the New Testament, might have an unintended effect of making us insecure.

[ 27 : 39 ] You see, it's clear who this promise is for, but I wonder if it might cause some of us to automatically think, you know, do I love God enough? What if I don't love God enough?

Is this promise still for me? How can I be sure? And so that's probably why we have verses 29 to 30.

If verse 28 is the pillar, verses 29 to 30 is the material to ensure that the pillar is strong. Because Paul wants you to be totally secure.

And to do that, he has to lift our eyes to see the very, very, very deep work of God, and not our work. Here in these verses, we have some of the richest theology in the Bible.

And it is deeply pastoral theology, not abstract theory. See, notice that in verse 28, he doesn't just describe Christians as those who love him.

[ 28 : 48 ] He also describes them as those who have been caught according to his purpose. And now, in verses 29 to 30, he follows through by showing how God's good and sovereign purposes are accomplished.

God takes five actions. He foreknew, he predestined, he called, he justified, he glorified.

And remember what we said at the beginning? God is the subject of these verses. Over and over again, he alone is the person performing these actions.

No one else. And notice that these five actions are all linked together. Whom God predestined, he also called.

Whom God called, he also justified. Whom God justified, he also glorified. And that's why theologians often call verse 30 the golden chain of salvation.

[ 30 : 04 ] salvation. They form one unbroken sequence, one series of divine initiatives with one final goal.

And so this is what Paul wants us to know. God has us in his hands from the very beginning to the very end. He has our very good in mind from before the beginning of the world to the world to come.

How can we be sure? Because firstly, God foreknew us. Now this is not the same as foresight. Foresight is when God sees what is going to happen in the future.

And of course God has foresight. But this isn't talking about foresight because verse 29, those whom God foreknew, he also predestined.

So God didn't just passively peer into the future and say, and he saw, oh, Ronald has decided that he'll put his faith in me.

[ 31 : 13 ] Whew! No. Because he wasn't just foreseeing acts of faith, he was lovingly selecting the clay from which he would form his masterpieces.

Indeed, a quick look at various Old Testament texts will tell us that the Bible usually uses the word know in a way that is active, personal, and relational.

And so it's not just about being aware of a fact. For God to know someone is to enter into a covenant relationship with them, to set his affection on those whom he has chosen.

Look at Jeremiah 1 verse 5, for instance. God saying to the prophet, before I formed you in the womb, I knew you. Before you were born, I set you apart.

I appointed you as a prophet to the nations. And so we could even say that to foreknow is to forelove. That is indeed the idea we get when we see how God relates to his people in places like Deuteronomy 7 verse 7 to 8 on the screen.

[ 32 : 28 ] The Lord did not set his affection on you and choose you because you were more numerous than other peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples.

No, here's the basis. It was because the Lord loved you and kept the oath he swore to your ancestors that he brought you out with a mighty hand and redeem you from the land of slavery, from the power of Pharaoh, king of Egypt.

And so here's the first piece of good news. Those who love him are foreknown. God has set his affection on you the way a husband sets his affection on a spouse.

An affection that is born out of saying, out of everyone in the world, out of all the girls in the world, I choose you.

He took the initiative. And those he foreknows, he predestines. That's the second link in the chain. And this is all about what God intends to do with those whom he foreknew.

[ 33 : 41 ] My brothers and sisters, if you are truly in Christ, God has already set his mind to make sure that you will be with Christ, like Christ for the glory of Christ.

When we are discouraged with our progress towards Christ-likeness, Paul is reminding us of this. God's before-the-ages plan is to create a Christ-shaped family, a renewed humanity modeled on the Son.

And you are included. How do you know that? God has called you.

God has called you. Now, calling in this verse isn't the call that you give when you ask your pet dog to come to you. You know, here, doggy, doggy, doggy. Calling in this verse is not the call that a friend gives you when he sees you entering the cafe when he's already got a table.

Oh, hello, you're there. Come, come, come, join us. And it certainly is not the call that you hear at a Billy Graham rally when the evangelist simply invites you to believe.

[ 35 : 00 ] Why not? Because those he called, he also justified. The fourth link in the chain clarifies the third.

after all, if the call is simply an invitation, that means everyone who hears Billy Graham invite them to believe are automatically justified.

Well, that can't be right. And so what does the calling of God mean here? It means that God has called you in such a way that you will answer.

God calls you in such a way that your eyes will be open. God calls you out of darkness and into his wonderful and marvelous light, as 1 Peter 2 verse 9 puts it.

God summons you to faith, and as you answer in faith, you are justified. Brothers and sisters, understand what God is telling you and me.

[ 36 : 07 ] Verse 28 says, God is working in all things for the good of those who love him. And you're thinking, how can I be sure of this?

And so God says, all right, let me give you a glimpse into my eternal purposes. I chose you in love before time existed.

I intend for you to be in my family. That means I intend for you to bear the family resemblance, to look like Jesus.

And so I call you, I summon you, the way Jesus summoned a dead man named Lazarus to come out of the tomb.

I summon you to life by justifying you. And so if all this is true, then what makes you think that I won't accomplish the final link?

[ 37 : 16 ] Those he justified, he also glorified. What makes you think that I won't make sure that in all things, I will be working for your good to bring you to conformity to Christ.

Yes, even in the bad things, the horrible things, the things that make you cry. This is Paul's big point.

God has always acted for the good of those whom he calls to himself. I know that there are some difficult theological points to swallow in verse 30, but we mustn't lose sight of why Paul tells us verse 30.

How can you know God is acting for your good? Because from eternity past to eternity future, God has always acted for your good.

He loves you. That's what those five actions in verse 30 all boil down to. He took those actions because he loves you.

[ 38 : 35 ] We love him, but only because he first loved us. And so as we meditate on these absolutely majestic verses, well let me just end with three concluding implications moments from what we've learned today.

Number one, God can use your past mistakes and regrets. In all things, God works together for your good, including your mistakes, including your regrets, including even your sin.

That's not an invitation for you to sin more. Remember, this is a promise for those who love God, and those who love God will grieve over their sin.



But it is a consolation for believers to know that when you've sinned, God doesn't just throw you away or think that you're inferior material. When you've stumbled and visited that pornographic website again, despite your resolve not to, know that God can still use that in some way.

Perhaps to humble you, to show that you can't fight sin by yourself. Perhaps to make you long more for Jesus' return, when temptation will be no more.

[ 39 : 55 ] God can use it if you listen to him. Number two, you can be secure to be Christ-like. Sometimes we think that the purpose of becoming a Christian is simply to become a nicer person.

You know, it can feel that way sometimes, doesn't it? But God says, I have a much, much grander plan for you. The great call I have for you isn't for you simply to be nice, nor is the great call I have for you simply to have a nice vocation, like becoming a doctor or something.

My great call for you isn't for you to get married and have a nice family. No, my great call for you is simpler and yet more profound than that. To be more like Jesus.

And I'll do whatever it takes. I'll use all things to achieve that goal. And in one of my hands, I'll have a chisel, and I'm more than willing to use it to carve you into my masterpiece.

And yet, and yet, on the other hand, in the other hand, I am holding you tight and not letting you go.

[ 41 : 07 ] That's what God is saying in 828-30. You can be secure to be Christ-like. Number three, we can be a people of unshakable hope.

As we finish, I just want you to imagine with me for a moment. I want you to imagine that you're Peter. And one fateful night, you watch in horror as you see Roman soldiers led by someone in your gang no less come and arrest Jesus, the very person whom you have put your entire hope in, the very person whom you left everything for.

and everything is going wrong. You panic, so you cut off the ear of a servant. But Jesus tells you, no, don't do that, let me go.

And so you go like a puppy who's been kicked to warm yourself before a fire. But before the night is over, you find yourself denying Jesus not once, not twice, but three times.

everything is going from bad to worse. And then finally, you see Jesus being mocked and crucified. And you know it won't be long before your next.

[ 42 : 37 ] Will you conclude that God is working? Will you conclude that God is working in these events?

Will you conclude that God is working in these events for your good? If Paul and Peter knew each other then, would Paul's words in Romans 8 28, that at that very moment, that God is working for the good of those who love him make any sense at all?

Or if you put yourselves in the shoes of Mary, would you conclude having seen your own son die, the one that the angel said would save people, that God is working for good?

God is when I put myself in the shoes of Peter or Mary, I can't imagine doing so. I can only imagine that God has abandoned me, or that God is some monstrous person who loves to play cruel jokes on people, or that God is a fiction.

And yet, even in those events, precisely in those events. That was exactly when God was doing his ultimate good.

[ 44 : 11 ] That was exactly when God was loving me as his beloved son took my place to justify me and bring me into his family.

My friends, whatever you're facing now, whatever doubts you might have about God's goodness, look at Jesus. Look at how God made sure he will go to the cross.

And when we look around us in the light of what he's done, our hope is secure. It's unshakable. Because in the gospel, it's crystal clear.

God is in control. God is good. And he's working for our good.

Amen.