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# Romans 8:28-29 and the Assurance of the Believer

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And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose For whom He foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the first-born among many brethren

Paul's words in Romans 8:28-29 express a ringing Christian assurance to the believing heart; they have brought comfort and encouragement to many troubled and afflicted believers down through the centuries. The opening words, "And we know," introduce a crucial assertion for victorious Christian living that is apprehended by faith. The verb "we know" (*οἶδαμεν*) denotes "the knowledge of faith and not mere intellectual investigation."<sup>1</sup> As Watson remarks, "As axioms and aphorisms are evident to reason, so the truths of religion are evident to faith."<sup>2</sup> The assurance expressed in Romans 8:28-29 is not a logical deduction of cold reason but rather an inner conviction of the believing heart wrought by the Holy Spirit on the basis of Scripture and verified in personal experience. In setting forth the great truths of the gospel in the first eight chapters of Romans, Paul used the verb *οἶδαμεν* six times (2:2; 3:19; 7:14; 8:22, 26, 28). Romans 8:28 states the crowning certainty of the Christian life.

Many indeed have found the sweeping assertion, "all things work together for good" (Rom. 8:28, KJV), difficult to believe. Faced

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<sup>1</sup> R C H Lenski, *The Interpretation of St Paul's Epistle to the Romans* (Minneapolis Augsburg Publishing House, 1961), p 550

<sup>2</sup> Thomas Watson, *All Things for Good* (1663, reprint, Edinburgh Banner of Truth Trust, 1986), p 10

with the sufferings and catastrophic experiences of life, many believers and even Christian leaders have found it difficult to accept this categorical assertion. During World War II a prominent preacher designated Romans 8:28 as "the hardest verse in the Bible to believe." While willing to admit that the countless ravages that have befallen the human race are the logical consequences of mankind's sin and rebellion against God, many a devout believer, when some shattering experience has befallen him, has cried out in bewilderment, "Why does God allow this to happen to me?" How can this kind of experience be reconciled with Romans 8:28? When Jacob's sons, who had gone to Egypt to buy needed food, came back without their brother Simeon, and reported to their father that the next time Benjamin must also go to Egypt, the patriarch cried out in despair, "All these things are against me" (Gen. 42:36).

And today Christ-rejecting, secular humanists in their spiritual blindness may reject the assertion that "all things work together for good." Such individuals, unconscious of any beneficent activity of God in their lives, while observing a tumultuous world with weary eyes, may readily conclude that human life has no higher meaning. They may be prone to agree with the cynical poet who wrote:

The world rolls round forever like a mill,  
It grinds out life and death, and good and ill,  
It has no purpose, heart, or mind, or will.  
Man might know this thing, were his sight less dim,  
Life whirlleth not to suit his petty whim,  
For it is quite indifferent to him.  
Nay, doth it use him harshly, as he saith?  
It grinds for him slow years of bitter breath,  
Then grinds him back into eternal death.<sup>3</sup>

How utterly contrary such a cynical evaluation of human life is to the declaration of Paul in Romans 8:28-29! No one can truly accept the gospel of Jesus Christ and accept such a cynical, godless interpretation of human existence. Instead the ringing assurance declared by Paul offers a message of inner certainty and reality that imparts meaning, power, and encouragement to the believing heart. The assurance that "God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God" is a message that the indwelling Holy Spirit vitalizes in the believing heart. It is a reality that "Christians know intuitively, though they may not always fully understand and sense it experientially."<sup>4</sup> The importance of the truth declared in Romans

<sup>3</sup> Source unidentified.

<sup>4</sup> John A. Witmer, "Romans," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary, New Testament* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1983), p. 473.

8:28-29, as well as the questions, perplexities, and unwarranted assumptions that have been made, make clear the need for a careful study and interpretation of these verses in the light of the context.

### The Contextual Setting

The particle  $\delta\epsilon$  in verse 28 clearly marks a close connection with the preceding verses. Verses 28-30 form a kind of climax to the teaching in verses 18-27, while verses 31-39 form a concluding paean of praise celebrating the redemption in Christ, delineated in the first eight chapters of Romans, as establishing a bond of love that can never be broken.

The force of the connecting  $\delta\epsilon$  has been understood in two ways. The rendering "but" in some English versions<sup>5</sup> indicates that its force is understood as adversative. Thus Godet suggests that  $\delta\epsilon$  marks the contrast between the present groaning of creation, the source of suffering in the present age, and "the full certainty already possessed by believers of the *glorious goal* marked out beforehand by the plan of God."<sup>6</sup> But Meyer feels that if such a contrast was intended "it must have been marked in some way or other (at least by the stronger adversative *ἀλλά*)."<sup>7</sup> Nor does the admission in verse 26 that "we do not know how to pray as we should" offer a basis for an assumed contrast. It is more natural to hold that  $\delta\epsilon$  here has the force of "and"<sup>8</sup> or "further,"<sup>9</sup> adding ground for encouragement amid the sufferings of this present life. This accords with the contents of verses 18-27.

In verse 18 Paul asserted his evaluation of the believers' present sufferings as "not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us." In verses 19-25 he supported his evaluation from creation's yearning for deliverance from corruption by pointing to the believers' present yearning for full redemption; in verses 26-27 he pointed to the present intercession of the Holy Spirit. Thus Lenski

<sup>5</sup> J N Darby, *The "Holy Scriptures," A New Translation* (reprint, Kingston-on-Thames Stow Hill Bible & Tract Depot, 1949), Gerrit Verkuyl, ed., *The Modern Language Bible The New Berkeley Version* (Grand Rapids Zondervan Publishing House, 1969), *The Twentieth Century New Testament A Translation into Modern English* (reprint, Chicago Moody Press, n d)

<sup>6</sup> Frederic Louis Godet, *Commentary on Romans* (1883, reprint, Grand Rapids Kregel Publications, 1977), p 322 (italics his)

<sup>7</sup> H A W Meyer, *Critical and Exegetical Hand-Book to the Epistle to the Romans* (1883, reprint, Winona Lake, IN Alpha Publications, 1979), p 333

<sup>8</sup> Most English versions translate the particle as "and", several omit the particle entirely

<sup>9</sup> J B Rotherham, *The Emphasized New Testament* (reprint, Grand Rapids Kregel Publications, 1959)

notes that to this intercession, "which aids us in our weakness in this distressing world, *δέ* adds another mighty comfort."<sup>10</sup> That truth is "that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose." "We know" indicates that this asserted knowledge is accepted by believers as a truth not to be gainsayed. It is an inner assurance vitalized and strengthened by the indwelling Holy Spirit. Hendriksen suggests that this knowledge is probably based on "two additional grounds: (a) *Experience*; that is, the effect on him of knowing how God had dealt with him and with others in the past. . . . And (b) *Acquaintance with specific biblical passages* which teach that in God's providence all things result in blessing for God's children, evil being overruled for good (Gen. 45:5, 7, 8; 50:20)."<sup>11</sup>

### The Central Assertion

The central assertion of verse 28 (NIV) is the truth that "in all things God works for the good" (*πάντα συνεργεῖ εἰς ἀγαθόν*). Taken alone, these four words may equally well be rendered as in the King James Version, "all things work together for good." The neuter plural *πάντα*, "all things, everything," has no indicated restrictions. In itself the term naturally includes all the experiences, whether sad or glad, that come into the lives of God's people. Yet in the light of the context (vv. 18-27) the primary reference of *πάντα* is to "every kind of painful experience in Christian lives, all those that press groans from our lips and make us groan inwardly in unuttered and unutterable distress. Some of the things that Paul has in mind he states in vv. 38, 39."<sup>12</sup>

According to a peculiar law of Greek grammar a singular verb may have a neuter plural subject.<sup>13</sup> Therefore the neuter plural *πάντα*, standing before the singular verb *συνεργεῖ*, naturally may be accepted as its subject. The present tense verb, "work together," denotes a continuing or protracted activity of unspecified duration, with the result that all things work "unto good" (*εἰς ἀγαθόν*) in the experience of the recipients. Paul's terse assertion does not further define the nature or scope of this "good," except to declare a beneficial impact.

<sup>10</sup> Lenski, *The Interpretation of St Paul's Epistle to the Romans*, p 550

<sup>11</sup> William Hendriksen, *Exposition of Paul's Epistle to the Romans*, New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1980), pp 278-79 (italics his)

<sup>12</sup> Lenski, *The Interpretation of St Paul's Epistle to the Romans*, p 551

<sup>13</sup> "A neuter plural subject regularly takes a singular verb" (H E Dana and Julius R Mantey, *A Manual Grammar of the Greek New Testament* [reprint, New York: Macmillan Co., 1967], p 165)

Dunn notes that "the pious hope that everything will work out for the best for the godly is 'a common axiom of antiquity' (Kasemann)."<sup>14</sup> Thus Paul's words would not strike his readers as a new and strange assertion. It is an assertion that believers in all walks of life have found an assuring and comforting truth. But the axiomatic nature of Paul's assertion makes it necessary to guard against unwarranted interpretations.

Paul's assertion must not be taken to mean that all things automatically work for the good of all people. That would be a fatalism for good, a view denied by Scripture and human experience. This statement does not sanction the view of enthusiasts, whether religious or secular, who blithely exult, "Hip, hip, hurray, let come what may, all things will be OK!"

Nor did Paul mean that all things that come into believers' lives are in themselves "good." Paul was not blurring moral distinctions between the various things and experiences of this life. The fiery persecutions, or the slanderous accusations to which Paul's readers were subjected by a Christ-rejecting world, were not in themselves good. Even the unjust assertions or unkind deeds of fellow believers, motivated by misunderstanding or ill will, cannot be declared to be good, or for one's good, in themselves. Even some of the things experienced as the result of one's own deeds or choices are not always in themselves good.

Nor did Paul mean that everything believers experience is God's will for them. Paul did not necessarily mean that those undesirable things that cannot be averted are God's will. Paul was not telling believers that when a thief stole a Christian's goods and escaped, the believers must piously say, "God willed it." God never condones sin in deed or attitude.

Paul's assertion that "all things work together for good" (ΚΙΥ) must be understood in the light of the context. It is also desirable to look more closely at the original statement, *πάντα συνεργεῖ εἰς ἀγαθόν*. The common view is to take *πάντα* as the subject. However, the entire statement in verse 28, as well as a significant textual variant, indicate that *πάντα* may be taken as the emphatic object of the verb, with the singular subject of the verb ("He") being the true subject of the sentence. So understood, the sentence may be rendered, "And we know that to those loving God all things He works together unto good, to those according to purpose called ones being." That various early scribes and interpreters so read the verse is clear from the

<sup>14</sup> James D G Dunn, *Romans 1–8*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas, TX Word Books, Publisher, 1988), p 481 See the literature cited See also *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, s v "Work, Do, Accomplish," by Hans-Christoph Hahn, 3 1152 and the references cited

fact that the words  $\delta$   $\theta\epsilon\acute{o}\varsigma$  ("God") were added as the expressed subject of the verb in Papyrus 46 (dated about A D 200), uncials A (fifth century) and B (fourth century), cursive 81 (ca. 1044), and the Sahidic Coptic version, and used in two of five known quotations of Romans 8:28 in the writings of Origen.<sup>15</sup> Though this textual evidence is too weak to accept  $\delta$   $\theta\epsilon\acute{o}\varsigma$  as the original reading, its presence indicates that "God" rather than "all things" was understood as the subject of the sentence. Since in the original Paul had already used the noun "God" ( $\tau\acute{o}\nu$   $\theta\epsilon\acute{o}\nu$ ), to have written  $\delta$   $\theta\epsilon\acute{o}\varsigma$  as the expressed subject of the verb  $\sigma\upsilon\nu\epsilon\rho\gamma\epsilon\acute{\iota}$  would have resulted in making Paul "a rather clumsy stylist."<sup>16</sup> But the textual variant establishes that Paul, having just mentioned God, would expect the reader to understand that "God" ( $\delta$   $\theta\epsilon\acute{o}\varsigma$ ) was the intended subject of the singular verb. This interpretation is expressly indicated in the NIV rendering and various other English versions.<sup>17</sup>

Another identification of the intended subject has been suggested. This view asserts that the true subject of the verb in verse 28 is "the Spirit," named in verse 26. That the Holy Spirit is accepted as the subject of the verb here is evident from the rendering of verses 26-28 in the New English Bible. In his interpretive rendering Barclay names the Holy Spirit as the subject: "We know that through the work of the Spirit all the different events of life are being made to work for good, for those who keep on loving God, those whom his purpose has called."<sup>18</sup> But the view that the Spirit is the intended subject of the verb "work together" runs into difficulty in verse 29, for that verse would then read, "For whom He [the Spirit] foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His [the Spirit's] Son." "This," Hendriksen notes, "is impossible, for nowhere in Scripture is Jesus Christ called the Son of the Holy Spirit."<sup>19</sup>

Most probable is the view that God is the intended subject of the verb  $\sigma\upsilon\nu\epsilon\rho\gamma\epsilon\acute{\iota}$ : "He works together with all things unto good." Clearly Paul's thought is not that "all things" as impersonal realities by themselves work together constructively; rather it is God's providential working in and through these various things that as-

<sup>15</sup> See United Bible Societies, *The Greek New Testament*, 3d ed (New York: American Bible Society, 1975)

<sup>16</sup> Hendriksen, *Exposition of Paul's Epistle to the Romans*, p. 279

<sup>17</sup> J. B. Rotherham, *The Emphasized New Testament*, *The Twentieth Century New Testament*, *The New Berkeley Version*, *The New Testament of the Jerusalem Bible*, *the New American Standard Bible*, and *the Revised Standard Version*

<sup>18</sup> William Barclay, *The New Testament: A New Translation* (Cleveland, OH: Foundation Books, 1976), p. 324

<sup>19</sup> Hendriksen, *Exposition of Paul's Epistle to the Romans*, pp. 279-80

sure that all things work together for good. This is expressly asserted when *ὁ θεός* is placed into the text. "This certainty," Grundmann remarks, "which is proper to all Jewish piety and derives from its consciousness of God, acquires here its fulness from the action of God."<sup>20</sup> This reading of Romans 8:28 is strongly supported by Paul's assertion in Philippians 1:6.

The present tense verb *συνεργεῖ* declares God's continuing activity in working all things "unto good" in the lives of His people. "For good" (*εἰς ἀγαθόν*) denotes the goal of the divine working, but the verb does not indicate when or how soon that goal is attained. The verb may mean that God "cooperates with" all these things to attain His goal for His own, but the expression *εἰς ἀγαθόν* suggests that in the providence of God all things "work together with or cooperate in" the achievement of the intended "good." Watson suggested a medical analogy: "Several poisonous ingredients put together, being tempered by the skill of the apothecary, make a sovereign medicine, and work together for the good of the patient. So all God's providences, being divinely tempered and sanctified, work together for the best to the saints."<sup>21</sup>

The "good" that God works to bring about in the lives of His people is not just a physical good, such as food, comfort, health, or pleasures of one kind or another experienced in this life. God works to fulfill His "purpose" for His own as outlined in verse 29. Thus Dunn remarks, "In the context here, where Paul has in view the eschatological climax which God has purposed for 'all things,' the *ἀγαθόν* will have an eschatological reference (cf. 14:16)."<sup>22</sup>

Yet Scripture and Christian experience confirm that even in this life God in His infinite way works "all things for good" for His own. Lenski refers to two biblical stories in support of this fact:

The Old Testament story of Joseph is a striking example of the mysterious and the wonderful way in which God makes the evil done to us eventuate for our good. Another instance is the story of the persecution precipitated by Saul. It scattered the great congregation at Jerusalem to distant parts, it seemed to be a calamity but served only for the good of the church by planting it in a hundred new places to flourish more than ever.<sup>23</sup>

On a small scale Christians through the ages have testified to this reality in their own lives. After completing seminary training it was

<sup>20</sup> *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* s.v. *ἀγαθός*, by Walter Grundmann, 1:17.

<sup>21</sup> Watson, *All Things for Good*, p. 11.

<sup>22</sup> Dunn, *Romans 1-8*, p. 481.

<sup>23</sup> Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans*, p. 551.

my joy to be invited to join the Christian training department in a midwestern Christian college. In the middle of the second year of a delightful ministry there a sudden and severe illness brought me to the brink of death; the hospital stay stretched into 110 days. Recovery was slow and often discouraging. Before long the threat of physical deafness was evident and two years later deafness became total. Before that time some calls to administrative service came for which I did not feel adequate. With total deafness such calls were effectively terminated, leaving me free for concentrated study of the Scriptures and their systematic exposition in the college and seminary classroom and in a written ministry. In looking back over the years I can gladly testify that I could not have chosen a more delightful ministry.

### The Careful Limitation

Paul carefully limited his confident assertion that "God causes all things to work together for good" to a distinct class of people. Paul added two limiting clauses, one placed before and the other following his central assertion, as seen in the rendering of Rotherham: "We know further that unto them who love God God causeth all things to work together for good,—unto them who according to purpose are such as He hath called." The first marks a clear limitation from the human side, the second states a limitation from God's side.

#### THOSE WHO LOVE GOD

Those for whom God works all things for good are emphatically identified as "those who love Him" (*τοῖς ἀγαπῶσιν τὸν θεόν*, "to those loving God"). The present tense articular participle characterizes these people by their abiding love for God, while the article with God ("the God") designates the true God whom Christians now love and serve. "Despisers and haters of God," Watson reminds, "have no lot or part in this privilege."<sup>24</sup> This abiding love for God is the difference between the regenerated individual and the unsaved.

This is the only place in Romans where Paul wrote of the believers' love for God; elsewhere the reference is to God's love for them. The verb for "love" (*ἀγαπάω*), here used to identify true believers, "is the word for the highest type of love, that of comprehension coupled with corresponding purpose."<sup>25</sup> Hogg and Vine call it "the characteristic word of Christianity."<sup>26</sup> It is not merely a love of

<sup>24</sup> Watson, *All Things for Good*, p 66

<sup>25</sup> Lenski, *The Interpretation of St Paul's Epistle to the Romans*, p 550

<sup>26</sup> C F Hogg and W E Vine, *The Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Thessalonians* (reprint, Grand Rapids Kregel Publications, 1959), p 105

emotion but a purposeful love that actively desires the welfare of others and sacrificially works toward that end. It reflects the love of God Himself toward needy sinners. Those who "love God" thus reveal an attitude and activity in accord with the very nature of God Himself. God is at the center of such a love-dominated life.

Such love in the hearts of believers is not meritorious; their love for Him does not prompt God to begin working all things for their good. Such a love is not native to the human heart; it can only be known as the result of God's love being poured out in the believers' hearts through the Holy Spirit (Rom. 5:5). As John wrote, "We love, because He first loved us" (1 John 4:19). It is this infusion of divine love that created the fundamental distinction between the saved and the unsaved. Thus Paul placed this factor forward. This criterion of "love to God is both the most elementary and the highest mark of being in the favour of God."<sup>27</sup> The believers' love "is nothing but the direct flowing back of the heavenly love which has been poured out upon" those whom God has called and saved.<sup>28</sup> Those who are lovers of God experience the reality that everything which may happen to them is being divinely used to further their highest good.

#### THOSE WHO ARE CALLED ACCORDING TO GOD'S PURPOSE

Paul's second limitation, placed after his basic assertion, passes from the human experience to the divine purpose and reaches into eternity past. Again the articular participle construction (*τοῖς κατὰ πρόθεσιν κλητοῖς οὖσιν*, literally, "to those according to purpose called ones being") again indicates the character of the distinct group in view. They are now defined exclusively in terms of God's purpose (*κατὰ πρόθεσιν*). The noun *πρόθεσιν* (literally, "an act of setting forth") here denotes God's pretemporal purpose, which is now working in and through history and moving toward the accomplishment of His intended goal. God, not men, determines the nature and progressive development of that purpose. He has taken the initiative in the lives of these individuals, not only inviting them but also effectively calling them in accord with His purpose for them. As a result they now are the subjects of the outworking of His purpose, and as such are the "called" (*κλητοῖς*). As Lenski notes, "The verbal is passive and involves God as the agent who called and the gospel as the divine means and the power by which he called."<sup>29</sup> Those in whose lives God is now working in accord with His

<sup>27</sup> John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans*, The New International Commentary (Grand Rapids: Wm B Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1959), p 314

<sup>28</sup> *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, s v "ἀγαπᾶω," by Ethelbert Stauffer, 1:50

<sup>29</sup> Lenski, *The Interpretation of St Paul's Epistle to the Romans*, pp 553-54

redemptive purpose are assured that the outcome will be for their ultimate good, since His purpose is filled with His love.

A Christian's assurance concerning the beneficent result of the outworking of God's purpose is grounded not in fluctuating love for Him nor steadfast obedience to His call, but in His unchanging love for believers as His "called ones." This realization gives purpose and encouragement for daily life. But one must remember that what God is now doing is the outworking of His eternal purpose, not the believers' limited and fallible plans and aspirations. This brings present assurance and peace when believers cannot comprehend His dealings with them. At such times they can rest in the assurance Jesus expressed in John 13:7, "What I do you do not realize now, but you shall understand hereafter." Often God gives His own a clear or growing understanding of His purposes for them in this present life; but when they cannot understand His purposes in permitting frustrations, sufferings, and persecutions to assail them in this life, by faith they can accept that fact that He is working out His eternal purposes. But if one stops with verse 28, and fails to go on to verse 29, he generally fails to realize what God's ultimate purpose is.

### The Clarifying Goal

In verse 29 Paul delineated God's comprehensive activities and ultimate purpose for those who are the subjects of His redemptive plan. The opening "for" (*ὅτι*) introduces the reason why all things work together for good to those who love God and have been called according to His purpose. The words "called according to His purpose" already contain the assured outcome, but Paul now "draws it out and details it in full because every part of it is so convincing and thus so comforting in the face of ills."<sup>30</sup>

#### THE COMPREHENSIVE ACTION

In verse 29 the purpose of God is unfolded in terms of His foreknowledge and foreordination of the redeemed. "For whom He foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son." The use of the personal relative pronoun "whom" (*οὓς*), as well as the triple use of the demonstrative pronoun "these" (*τούτους*) in verse 30, underlines the truth that God's plan relates to individuals, not merely to the experiences they undergo. The two verbs rendered "foreknew" and "predestined" indicate that God's plan for the redeemed began in eternity past and reaches into eternity future.

"Whom He foreknew" (*οὓς προέγνω*) means more than that He knew about believers before they came into being. As Kelly remarks,

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., p. 555.

"His foreknowledge is of persons, not of their state or conduct; it is not what, but whom He foreknew."<sup>31</sup> The Greek verb "foreknew" (*προέγνω*) means "to know in advance, to foreknow." The preposition *προ* does not change the meaning of the verb (*γινώσκω*); it only dates the knowledge. God's knowledge of those He chose goes back to eternity past (1 Pet. 1:2, 20). In His omniscience God knew, knows, and foreknew all men. But, unlike *οἶδα*, this verb does not imply mere intellectual apprehension; it also indicates an active and affectionate desire to bless. "That this character, in which they were foreknown to God, presupposes the subjection to faith (the *ὑπακοή πίστεως*, i. 5), was self-evident to the Christian reader."<sup>32</sup> Paul's focus in Romans 8:29 is on the terminus, not on the intermediate stages (cf. v. 30).

The second verb, "He also predestined" (*καὶ προώρισεν*), likewise records God's activity on behalf of Christians; the action also relates to the eternal past but looks forward to what He wanted to achieve with them. The simple verb *ὀρίζω* means "to mark out or determine the boundaries" (cf. the English "horizon"), hence "to determine or appoint." Used of persons it means to set out or determine the goal or destiny of those foreknown; the preposition *προ* again marks this divine action as taking place in eternity past. The indicated action cannot be restricted to one point but covers all that is involved until the consummation of the goal. Again the indicated action relates to individual persons, not necessarily what happens to them. This predetermined goal cannot be separated from the fact of God's self-motivated love for them. As Behm notes, this is "the New Testament faith in providence in its most individual form."<sup>33</sup>

#### THE CHRIST-CENTERED GOAL

The indicated goal, "to become conformed to the image of His Son" exhibits "not only the dignity of the ordination but also the greatness of the love from which the appointment flows."<sup>34</sup> Dunn declares, "It is the sureness of the end as determined from the beginning which Paul wishes to emphasize."<sup>35</sup>

God's purpose for His children is their conformity "to the image of His Son" (*τῆς εἰκόνης τοῦ υἱοῦ αὐτοῦ*). "His Son" (cf. "His own Son," 8:3) denotes Christ's unique and eternal Sonship. Motivated by

<sup>31</sup> William Kelly, *Notes on the Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Romans* (London G Morrish, 1873, reprint, n d), p 153

<sup>32</sup> Meyer, *Critical and Exegetical Hand-Book to the Epistle to the Romans*, p 335

<sup>33</sup> *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, s v "προνοέω, πρόνοια," by J Behm, 4 1016

<sup>34</sup> Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans*, p 318

<sup>35</sup> Dunn, *Romans 1-8*, p 483

His love for lost humanity, God sent forth His Son "in the likeness of sinful flesh and as an offering for sin" (8:3). In His sinless life, His vicarious atonement, and His triumphant resurrection, the incarnate Son perfectly realized the divinely intended destiny of the chosen sons of God. On the basis of Christ's perfection as the incarnate Son it is now God's purpose to form a great family of sons, all of them patterned after the "image" of the incarnate Son of God. The word "image" (*εἰκῶν*) denotes a derived likeness in believers. In the saints this image "is not accidental but derived as the likeness of the child is derived from its parents. Through the new birth we become children of Jesus Christ (Heb. 2:13) and thus inherit His image."<sup>36</sup> Thus the goal of God for His chosen sons is that they shall be conformed to and manifest something not merely like Christ but "what He is in Himself, both in His spiritual body and in His moral character."<sup>37</sup>

Interpreters differ on whether Paul had in mind "(a) *only* the final conformation; that is, only that part of transformation into Christ's image that will take place at his Return; or . . . to (b) the entire process of transformation, beginning already when the sinner is brought out of the darkness into the light."<sup>38</sup> If the reference is merely to the great eschatological change that will occur at the resurrection, then the first view is to be preferred. Thus Lenski holds that "Paul is pointing his readers from their sufferings to their comfort amid trials and to their assured hope, and this means their coming glory."<sup>39</sup> But in view of Paul's reference to Christ as "His Son" and His asserted uniqueness in that day, the moral element in the conformity cannot be overlooked. More than bodily conformity to Christ's image is involved. Dunn holds that "the implication of Paul's language here and elsewhere is of an image to be formed in Christians by process of transformation."<sup>40</sup> Since their conformity "to the likeness of His Son" was the goal of their predestination from eternity past, it is logical that this conformity involves not only their bodily transformation but also the moral transformation during the period before His return.

Clearly the bodily transformation of believers into the image of the risen Christ will be the glorious climax of their being "conformed to the image of His Son," but if only this is in view here then Paul

<sup>36</sup> Kenneth S Wuest, *Romans in the Greek New Testament for the English Reader* (Grand Rapids Wm B Eerdmans Publishing Co, 1955), p 145

<sup>37</sup> W E Vine, *An Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words* (Westwood, NJ Fleming H Revell Co), 2 247

<sup>38</sup> Hendriksen, *Exposition of Paul's Epistle to the Romans*, p 283 (italics his)

<sup>39</sup> Lenski, *The Interpretation of St Paul's Epistle to the Romans*, p 561

<sup>40</sup> Dunn, *Romans 1-8*, p 483

passes over a fundamental aspect of redemption in Christ. In 2 Corinthians 3:18 Paul spoke of a present spiritual transformation of believers into the image of Christ through the work of the Spirit. This present transformation into the image of Christ is based on having the mind of Christ (Phil. 2:5-8) and is experienced in sharing the suffering of Christ in this life (3:10). Clearly both aspects of the believer's transformation into the image of Christ are included in the eschatological likeness to Christ portrayed in 1 John 3:2-3.

This blessed hope—that believers will be conformed to the image of His own Son—explains God's dealings with them as His chosen sons in this present age. He is ever at work to reproduce the moral image of Christ in them. All that now comes into their lives He uses for their good to further that glorious goal. His aim for them now is not to make them happy, materially prosperous, or famous, but to make them Christlike. He now uses "all things," the sad as well as the glad, the painful as well as the pleasant, the things that perplex and disappoint as well as the things they eagerly strive and pray for, to further His eternal purpose for them. In His infinite wisdom He knows what is needed to bring about that transformation. For some of His own He may need to use hotter fire and strike with harder blows than in His dealings with others to effect the formation of Christ's image in them. This may be because some believers may be more resistant to His moulding activities or are more prone to insist on their own efforts.

When believers understand and accept the Father's loving purpose of developing Christlikeness in them as His beloved children, thus preparing them for that future day when the blessed Savior will come again to take them home, then they can rejoice and thank Him for all He is doing in them. Christians may not now understand how all that comes into their lives works together for their good. Yet they can trust God's love and unreservedly entrust themselves to Him. As they increasingly experience the reality of this profound Christian assertion from the pen of Paul, they can gladly join in proclaiming its reality to others.

The closing statement in verse 29 adds the glorious truth that the ultimate aim in God's redemptive program is the preeminence of Jesus Christ as "the first-born among many brethren." The expression involves both His distinctiveness from and identity with the vast redeemed family of God.

In that coming day the presence of God's Son surrounded by "many brethren" conformed to His likeness declares their union with Him. He is the pattern for the entire family of sons, each conformed to His nature. The bodies of their humiliation will have been conformed to the body of His glory; all will manifestly be sons of the resurrection, either raised from the dead or instantly transformed

into His likeness at His coming (1 Cor 15 42-55) Spiritually made like Him, these 'many brethren' will demonstrate God's redemptive purpose "to have a family of sons, beloved even as Christ is, and like Him in body, in spirit, in glory, in inheritance, dwelling as the Royal Family in the mansions Christ has gone before to prepare"<sup>41</sup>

But the reference to Christ as "the first-born" declares His abiding distinctness from all the other sons They are conformed to His image, He is and remains distinct and unique as the Father's "first-born" (*πρωτοτοκον*) This distinctive designation of Jesus Christ expresses His position of priority to and preeminence over all the other members of the family In the Old Testament the term was used of the oldest son of his father, he was the object of special parental affection and inherited special rights, he was expected to further the welfare and concerns of the entire family In the New Testament the term is five times applied to Christ in a spiritual sense to set forth His uniqueness as the eternal Son of God Vine points out the chronological sequence of these references as follows

(a) Col 1 15, where His eternal relationship with the Father is in view, and the clause means both that He was the Firstborn before all creation, and that He Himself produced creation, (b) Col 1 18 and Rev 1 5, in reference to His resurrection, (c) Rom 8 29, His position in relationship to the Church, (d) Heb 1 6, R V, His Second Advent (the R V when He again bringeth in, puts again in the right place, the contrast to His First Advent, at His birth, being implied), cp Psa 89 27<sup>42</sup>

In light of the marvelous statement of assurance in Romans 8 28-29, believers rejoice in knowing that all that God is now doing and will yet do in bringing many sons to glory will ever redound to the praise and honor of the blessed Lord and Savior Jesus Christ as the Firstborn of the Father May this ringing message grip each believer's heart and mind, stimulate his devotion and service, and bring unceasing glory and honor to the matchless Savior and Lord!

<sup>41</sup> R Govett *The Righteousness of God The Salvation of the Believer or The Argument of the Romans* (Norwich Fletcher and Son, 1891 reprint, Conley R Schoettle Publishing Co 1981 under the title *Govett on Romans*), p 368

<sup>42</sup> Vine *An Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words* 2 104



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