

**Sermon for Sunday, May 16, 2010**  
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**GOD'S GOALS, OUR DESTINY**  
**Romans 8:28-35**

The story of Augustine's journey to faith leads to the theme of Romans 8 and God's good plans for us. Augustine was a man on the rise in the Empire. Born into the upper class, well-educated, Augustine was ambitious, hard-working and well-connected. His chosen field was rhetoric. It offered a good income and regular contact with the world of leaders. That kept him reading great literature. He considered the philosophies and religions of his day including Christianity, which fascinated and troubled him. Although an unbeliever, he attended church whenever he could. He conversed with believers, even the great bishop Ambrose, and made "Scriptures the subject of deep study" for perhaps a decade.

At the same time he was, he admits, a slave "of sexual desire" and "worldly affairs." One day, a leading Roman official named Ponticianus visited Augustine's home.<sup>1</sup> Books were lying everywhere. Ponticianus picked up a manuscript at random and found to his surprise that it was Romans. When he learned that Augustine was not yet a believer, he regaled everyone the story of Anthony, a great and wealthy man who converted to Christianity, then sold everything to become a monk. More than that, Ponticianus said the story of Anthony inspired his own conversion and the conversion of his friends.

The story filled Augustine with affection for Ponticianus, but reproach for himself. Augustine wanted to become a Christian, but he was torn. He wanted to become a new man, but he was afraid that if he converted he would lose his two enthralling mistresses – his concubine and his career. That day, Augustine found himself in a "grand struggle." For ten years he had searched for the truth. He had settled on Christianity but his old loves held him back. At length he broke down in "a massive downpour of groans and tears" and left the villa he shared with his friend (and seeker) Alypius.

Augustine threw himself down under a fig tree, crying, "How long, how long... Why not end my impure life in this very hour?" At that moment, he heard the voice of a child chanting, "Take and read; take and read." Augustine guessed that the chant was part of a child's game. Nonetheless he took it as a divine command. Augustine had kept Romans with him. He opened it and read the first passage he saw: "Not in riots and drunken parties, not in eroticism and indecencies, not in strife and rivalry, but put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh in its lusts." He "neither wished nor needed to read further." At once, certainty flooded his heart. The gloom of doubt vanished. Minutes later, his life-long friend Alypius joined him and both resolved to follow Christ. Soon both men quit their careers, studied the word full time and gave their all to Christ. Before long both were bishops.

The story of Augustine illustrates Paul's principle: In all things, God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. We considered Romans 8:28-30 last week, but it is so rich it deserves a little review. Consider God's work with Augustine. Ponticianus, an important official, happened to be a Christian. He happened to pick up a book - Romans. He happened to tell the story of Anthony. A child happened to say "take, read." And he happened to read the verse he most needed. So God worked for Augustine whom he predestined, called according to his purpose, and justified. He made everything work together for Augustine who came to love God. Thus God makes a strong promise: He works all things for our good.

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<sup>1</sup> Chadwick, *Confessions*, pages 141-53.

## 1. God's strong promise: He works all things for our good.

Earlier, in Romans 8:17, Paul said that the children of God share in Jesus' sufferings, then share in his glory. Until then, we groan and travail waiting for the redemption. Clearly, when Paul says everything works for the good of those who love God, he doesn't mean everything works out *the way we would like*.

Almost everyone has suffered some loss in recent years. God never promises that life will always be easy. This very passage says believers must follow the path of Christ: suffering, then glory. And until glory we groan and travail. But the Lord promises that our suffering and groaning will bring us closer to Christ.

A friend of mine accidentally poisoned the soil near her home. As she brought traces of the soil into her home, she became sick. She began to lose her energy, then her weight. Finally her life was in the balance before someone discovered the cause. She says, "It was terrible, but I learned so much, grew so much, that I'm thankful the Lord sent that illness into my life."

## 2. God's strong goal: We will be like Christ.

This purpose can be described several ways, but the highest and best is this: We will become more like Christ. We will be like Christ in two ways: when Jesus returns and fashions a new heaven and a new earth, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is. We will have renewed and eternally strong bodies and we will be morally perfect. But we can and should become more like Jesus even now.

That is, we should conduct ourselves as Jesus did. The imitation of Christ is a leading theme of Scripture. It's human nature to imitate. We dress, more or less, the way our friends dress. Look around. Women, your hair probably looks a lot like the hair of friends your age. Young women tend to have hair that is long, brown and slightly wavy. Professional women have a look we all can picture. As women get older, their hair tends to get shorter and blonder.

Men are even more uniform - blue jeans and t-shirts at home. Some men wear uniforms at work. Businessmen don't wear a uniform, but have you noticed that men's suits come in exactly three colors: dark blue, dark gray, and beige? When was the last time you saw a suit that was forest green, peach, mauve or orange?

It is human nature to imitate. 3 John 11 says, "Dear friends, do not imitate what is evil but what is good." John assumes that everyone imitates and urges us to imitate the right people and right things.

Because it's been abused, Protestants are wary of the imitation of Christ motif. In other branches of Christendom people try to earn God's favor by imitating Christ. And they imitate the wrong things like incidentals such as having no home, no property, no family. Some of us still wince at naïve WWJD bracelets. What would Jesus do? He might raise the dead, or calm a raging storm with a word.

OK, all that is true. But Paul says it's a believer's destiny to be like Christ. Romans 8:28: God "predestined [us] to be conformed to the image of his Son." Jesus himself commanded his disciples to follow his example. This is both our destiny and our obligation. Meditate on your destiny, your obligation. Here are some particulars:

Shortly before Jesus went to the cross, he said, "Whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave; just as the Son of man did not come to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Matthew 20:26-28). That is, we must serve just as Jesus served.

John says we must "walk" – conduct ourselves - as Jesus walked: "We should love one another... This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers" (John 2:6, 3:11,16). Jesus' actions define the character of love and they show us how to love.

Paul agrees and makes it a theme in Ephesians. To quote:

- “Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you” (Ephesians 4:32).
- “And live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us” (Ephesians 5:2).
- “Husbands, love their wives as Christ loved the church, and gave himself up for her, to make her holy.” (Ephesians 5:25).

In the home, love has a focal point. Husbands aim for more than happiness, calm, conviviality. They aim for true blessings, but their horizon is flat, never soaring above this world. Jesus enjoyed a good meal as much as anyone, but he knew how to aim higher, for holiness. We put others first, just as Jesus put us first (Philippians 2:3-8).

Jesus expects his disciples to pattern themselves after him: "A student is not above his teacher, but everyone who is fully trained will be like his teacher" (Luke 6:40, cf. John 13:16). Disciples should be like the teacher. So, after Jesus washed his disciples' feet, he says we ought to wash each other's feet. (John 13:1-16).

This could be a dazzling privilege. Jesus healed the sick (Matthew 4:23), cleansed lepers (Matthew 8:1-4) and drove out demons (Matthew 8:26-34), then commissioned the disciples to do the same (Matthew 10:8). But he also said, "If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also." Indeed, "Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps" (John 15:20, 1 Peter 2:18-25).

Matthew 10:24-25 says, "A student is not above his teacher, nor a servant above his master. It is enough for a student to be like his teacher and the servant like his master." So, Jesus sat loose with possessions and urged his disciples to have a loose grip (Luke 9:57, 12:13-34). Jesus was willing to break with his family (Matthew 12:47-50, Mark 3:20-35, John 7:2-5) and expected the same of his disciples (Matthew 8:22, Luke 14:26).

Imitation is powerful. At best it works this way: Jesus sets an example which believers, and especially church leaders should follow. This in turn sets an example for others. Paul said this very thing – about ten times. He told his churches to imitate him as he imitates Christ (1 Corinthians 11:1, 4:16; Philippians 4:9, 3:17!, 2 Thessalonians 3:7, Timothy 4:12, Titus 2:7. See also 1 Peter 5:1-5).

So, when Ponticianus spoke to Augustine, he regaled him with the story of Anthony, a young man, born to a prominent family. Anthony heard and imitated Christ. He sold everything, gave it to the poor, and lived in the desert without a home, where he prayed, worshiped and offered wisdom to all who came to him. The story was perfect for Augustine who loved the world too much. It moved Ponticianus to convert and it moved Augustine, too.

This is God's strong goal for us. Romans says God predestined us and called us to this. Some people say the doctrine of God's sovereignty undermines moral responsibility. They say it leads to moral complacency – whatever will happen will happen. But no. We're predestined to be like Christ in all his moral strength and beauty! This is our strong assurance; we will be like Christ in his glory. This should be our goal and our meditation.

### **3. Our strong assurance: We will be glorified.**

As we saw last week, this verb is actually in the past tense. Our future status is so sure that God speaks of it as a past event: We have been glorified.

Let me expand this a bit. When we think of God's sovereign call and the future, we tend to conceive of it individually – my new life. But God calls us to a family: "For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers." Jesus is

the big brother and we have many brothers. God calls us individually, one by one, name by name. But He calls us to a body, to relationships. These relationships are one of the means God uses to lead you to glory

That is why I stress the value of getting into a small group where you can know and be known. There you will find friends who care for you, pray for you, rejoice when you rejoice, weep when you weep.

There are groups for men and women; for seekers, new disciples, and leaders. Some groups are temporary, some are twelve years old. Some are seasonal, others year-round. Some united by age or stage, others deliberately diverse. If you can't find one, call or look in Info Central. Every Sunday school class is a small group.

#### **4. What then? Five strong questions.**

Hear it again: "In all things God works for the good of those who love him. Those whom God predestined, He also called; those He called, He also justified; those He justified, He also glorified" (Romans 8:28, 30). These promises are often called the peak of Romans. Every word about our sin, about Christ's death and resurrection, every promise of eternal life, peace with God, and hope in suffering has led to this great assurance: All this will surely be yours. The Lord himself has known and loved you since before time and shall live for all eternity. Nothing can separate us from the life of Christ – one by one, and together with all the saints. We have reached the top of the mountain of God's love and plan.

Theologians often compare Romans 8 to the vista at a mountaintop. They don't mean the terrible mountains where wind whips and storms threaten. They mean green and flower covered mountains. We have climbed to the top with Paul and now we rest and meditate on all things. That is Paul's mood, as he asks, "What then shall we say?" He asks five questions:

First, if God is for us, who can be against us? Literally, if God is for us, who is against us? The translation matters, for in fact many are against us. The question is who are they? What can they do to us? Let's name some enemies.

Paul mentions persecution and the sword. For him, that meant the empire in its persecution of this novel and growing religion. The powers of this age, the cruelty of tyrants remain. They are hostile to believers because they know we have strength to rebel against every tyrant, for we serve another Sovereign.

Death is still an enemy, not yet destroyed. Our own sin is an enemy. The flesh, our bad habits and stupid sins, battle us within. Human rivals say and do things to wound us. Spiritual foes oppose us. John mentions the world, the flesh and the devil – formidable foes. Sometimes, in bad health and calamity, it seems that the whole world is against us.

The most alarming of all foes is the Lord himself. The Lord spoke to Assyria and Babylon and said, "I am against you" (Nahum 2:13, 3:5; Jeremiah 50:31, 51:25). He told rebellious Israel and her false shepherds, "I am against you" (Jeremiah 21:13, Ezekiel 13:8-20).

How Distressing! But now, because of the work of Christ, God says, "I am for you. And all these foes, who are they, compared to the mighty God? No strong foe is strong enough to do undo us. If God is for us, who is against us?"

Second, since God did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, will He not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?

This is called an argument from the greater to the lesser. If God did this great thing, and gave up his one and only Son, surely he will do a lesser thing. God did not spare his Son, but gave him up for us. The term "give up" or "deliver up" is notable because it is so common in the passion narratives.

This must remind us of Abraham, who did not spare his son, but offered him to God. When he did, we knew that he would have obeyed God in anything, because he was so sure, as he said, that "the Lord will provide."

Now Abraham's act spirals higher. God did not spare his Son to demonstrate that the Lord will provide; He will give us "all things" that is, everything we need: our daily bread, clothing and fatherly care.

No he doesn't give us everything we want but we understand why. A mother who truly loves her child does not give whatever the child wants. There is the obvious – candy and bedtimes and small chores. But it can be more subtle. A parent may let a child struggle because it is time for them to struggle. Eventually, a girl must learn to comfort herself at night, falling back asleep without Mom and Dad. A boy must dress himself however hard buttons and laces seem. We must let them struggle if there hope to mature coming to terms with a friend who is no friend. So the Lord will let us struggle and even as we do, he gives us all that we need

Third, who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies.

In fact, many men do bring a charge, an accusation, a condemnation against God's elect. We're accused of hypocrisy, overweening pride, legalism, starting wars, of being dupes and dopes. Sometimes we accuse ourselves!

Worse still, Satan brings a charge. Zechariah 3 presents a vision of Joshua, the high priest, standing in the temple. Instead of wearing the pure raiment the priest must wear as he makes his sacrifices, he is covered with filth. Satan accuses him – he has no right to offer sacrifices dressed in that! But the Lord silences Satan. He tells an angel, "Remove his filthy garments. Clothe him in clean garments." Note: soap was invented in 300 A.D. People didn't wash clothes nearly so often as today. Dirty clothes indeed.

This is a picture of the charge that comes against us, and the gospel. For Satan does accuse believers and say, "Because of their sin, their filth, they have no right to stand before you, O God." God says, "Yes, but I will remove their sin, their dirty clothes and clothe them in Christ." Revelation 12:10 says when Satan accused the saints, "they overcame him by the blood of the Lamb."

Who then will bring a legal accusation against God's elect? Many, but God is the judge and he justifies – declares us innocent and righteous (See Isaiah 50:8-9).

Fourth, it is God who justifies, who is he that condemns? Jesus who died and was raised to life "is at the right hand of God... interceding for us."

So, many accuse us, but God does not; Jesus does not. No, Jesus died for our sins and rose for our justification. Now he sits at the right hand of the Father, resting from his work, receiving the honor he is due. But he also intercedes for us. He continues "to secure for his people the benefits of his death" If Christ is our advocate, who can condemn.

Fifth, who shall separate us from the love of Christ?

This is the climactic question. Paul searches for a possible answer naming every adversary, all who might separate us from Christ: Trouble, distress, even persecution – the threat of death? Or the sword – actual death? No the sword will send us into Jesus' presence. Famine or nakedness – lack of food or clothing? No, the Lord has promised to feed and clothe us. We cannot even separate ourselves from the love of God.

These forces bring real suffering, real pain. They are hard to bear. But no, nothing can separate us from the love of Christ.

What then shall we say? We have climbed the mountain. Now we survey all that Christ has done – removed our sin, granted us life, called us to faith, granted peace, hope and understanding, Sonship and

endurance. There is nothing left to do but to trust God and to thank him and perhaps to remind us of the great questions and the good answers:

- Since God is for us, who is against us?
- If God gave us his only Son, will He withhold anything we need?
- If God justifies, who will bring a charge against God's elect?
- If Jesus intercedes for us, who will condemn us?
- Who will separate us from the love of Christ? No one.

Perhaps we should return to Augustine. We read how he started with Christ. Hear how he finished. The Vandals overran Rome (this was not first sacking of Rome) when he was an old man, then turned toward North Africa where Augustine lived. Friends urged him to flee, but he said his flock needed him now more than ever. He was seventy-five or seventy-six and fell ill during the siege of his city. He spent his final days in repentance and prayer.

What then do you say? Do you worry about separation from the love of Christ? Perhaps you see old friends partying, abandoning sacred promises, leaving the church and its fellowship. If Christ loves you and you trust him, nothing can separate you from his love.

The great doctrine of the first part of Romans is this: While we were sinners Christ died for us. The great doctrine of the middle is this: Nothing will separate us from that love.