

Notes for the Ones Called-Out to Meet

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God is Working to Make Us Like Jesus

by Dan Trygg

“And we know that to the ones loving God He works all things together for good, to those who are called according to His purpose.²⁹ For those whom He foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son, so that He would be the firstborn among many brethren;³⁰ and these whom He predestined, He also called; and these whom He called, He also justified; and these whom He justified, He also glorified.”
Romans 8:28-30

As we have been working through this chapter, we have been noting the frequency with which Paul has chosen to utilize compound words which have the same initial prefix, a prefix meaning “together-with”. The purpose for this has been to emphasize our union with Christ as our representative Redeemer, ...then our union with Creation as jointly longing for the glory that will come with Jesus’ return, ...and then to emphasize our co-partnership with the Holy Spirit in prayer. The repetitive use of this stylistic technique would stand out more and more, as the reader would work through the passage in the original Greek. **In today’s passage, we have two more instances of this.**

The first is the verb, “He works-together”. The prefix implies that God is blending-together both the good and the bad, the positive and the negative, in such a way as to *cause* something *positive* and *beneficial*. **The word first implies God’s contemporaneous action in our lives.** He is *always* present, *always* active. **The other concept is this idea of *blending* or “*working-together*” all things.** Not everything *is* good. Paul is *not* saying that bad, hurtful or sinful things don’t matter, or that they are of no consequence. Obviously, they *are*. Some of our actions, or the actions of others, can leave consequences that will follow us for years, ...sometimes forever. **God, however, is able to work these poor choices, negative experiences or bitter consequences together-with other experiences, opportunities and the gracious provision which He brings to the mixture. The end result will be positive, beautiful and will bring glory to God.** We could think of God as a master chef. Although some of the raw ingredients may be bitter or harsh if eaten directly, when mixed together in the right proportion with a wise selection of other ingredients, these same bitter or distasteful spices can be utilized to turn a somewhat ordinary meal into something very special. God can do *that* with our lives. *That is good news!*

Note, however, that this is not a promise for everyone. This verse says that **God works all things together for good for those who love Him.** He makes no such promise for those who do *not* love Him. The pungent and bitter experiences of their lives may *not* be mixed with the experiences, opportunities and gracious provision from God, ...either because He does not chose to bring them into the mixture of their lives, ...or because the person may reject those blessings when they come, because they do not value them. In either case, **those who do not love God cannot expect Him to work all things together for good in their lives.**

Also, **God’s evaluation of what is “good” may not be the same as yours, ...or what other people might consider as “good”.** He says, “For My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways My ways, declares the LORD” (Isa. 55:8). To us, what is “good” may simply be *what is comfortable*, what *makes life more pleasurable* or *enjoyable* in our immediate circumstances. God is not so interested in the short term. God is looking at a goal, an end-point of *fulfillment of His will*. The word for “good” here refers to what is “beneficial, useful, sound, healthy, advantageous, morally upright, just and right”. Note that happiness or pleasantness would come as a secondary result of what is beneficial, useful, and healthy. In this passage in Romans, **God is not promising to make life fun for us, or that our painful experiences will suddenly become joyful.** No. **What He is saying is that He will redeem those negative experiences to make them useful, beneficial and advantageous for His Kingdom purposes.**

What are God’s Kingdom purposes? His overarching purpose for history is to cause everything to be brought under Jesus’ dominion, to be summed up in Christ, and to bring Him glory (I Cor. 15:20-28; Eph. 1:9,10; Phil. 2:9-11). One aspect of this is that God wants to make Jesus to be the “firstborn among many brothers and sisters”. If *these* are God’s overarching objectives, then *whatever can be used in our lives to lead us or others to come to Christ, to serve and honor Him, can become something “good”, ...something “beneficial, advantageous and profitable”.*

Paul is writing with even a more narrow focus in mind, however. He says that **God works all things together for good “to the ones called according to His purpose”.** The word for “purpose” here means something “set out beforehand”, a *predesignated plan or intention*. In other words, God has something in mind for His children, some direction to which He has “called” or “invited” us. **What is that predesignated end-point or goal?**

Verse 29 says, “**For whom He foreknew He determined ahead of time to be conformed-ones of the image of His Son.**” There is a great deal of debate about God’s sovereignty and our free will in salvation. Some emphasize “predestination”, thinking that God picks some to believe, while *not* choosing others. **This does not fit with the idea that Jesus died for all people** (Jn. 3:16; I Jn. 2:2), **or that God wants no one to perish, but all to be saved and come to a knowledge of the truth** (II Pet. 3:9; I Tim. 2:3-6). **If you look closely at the passages that use the “predestine” verb, they never actually state that God will predestine non-Christians to become believers.** Instead, this word is used to describe what God determined beforehand would happen to those who will believe. The Greek word is *pro-horizō*, which literally meant to “draw a boundary around ahead of time”. (We get the word “horizon” from the basic root of this word. It describes the limit or boundary that we can see of the earth’s surface.) The basic meaning is more about *defining or enclosing a general territory*, rather than *determining a specific path*. In this context, it means that **God defined or “bounded beforehand” what the “package deal” would be for those who would become Christians.** Before the foundation of the world, He chose us who would be in Christ to become something, i.e., **that we would be holy and blameless** in love (Eph. 1:4). **He predetermined to adopt us as sons** (vs. 5), **with all the legal rights and privileges implied by that status** (Some people see in this a predetermination to bring us to being born again into Christ, but that is *not* what the word picture implies. God could have saved us to be slaves, but instead *He hand-picked us to be full legal heirs*. Again, the point of the word “predestine” was to *decide ahead of time what the package deal of salvation would be*, *not* to determine who would become a Christian.). **We were also predestined to be to the praise of His glory** (vss. 11,12). To this, Paul adds here in Romans 8 that **part of the salvation package for us includes becoming “conformed to the image of His Son”.**

The word, “conform” is the other “together-with” word in this passage. It means to “have the same or similar form or nature”. In other words, **we will become like Jesus both in our inner character and in our very nature.** (This is a different word from Rom. 12:2, where Christians are exhorted not to “be conformed to this age”. The word *there* means to conform your *outward pattern* to look like those around you. The implication is that a Christian would be *in contradiction* to his or her true inner self to do this. Instead of continuing in worldly patterns just to “fit in” with non-believers, Paul is encouraging us to discover what that *inner change* will do to the *outward expressions* of our life.) The apostle Peter spoke of this, saying that *we can now become sharers of* (partners-with) *the divine nature*, by intimacy with God and walking in His promises (II Pet. 1:3,4). The apostle John, however, tells us that *we will not see the fullness of our salvation until Christ returns.* **When Jesus does come back, and we see Him, we will be transformed to be “like Him”** (I Jn. 3:2). **Even our physical bodies will be changed.** In I Cor. 15:35-54, Paul describes how **we will be drastically transformed.** Our mortal, earthly bodies will become like Jesus’ immortal heavenly body. We will *bear the image* of our heavenly “last Adam”, Christ (vss. 45-49).

Notice that **God’s foreknowledge is part of this equation, here.** “Those whom He *foreknew*, He also predestined...” **No one knows exactly what this foreknowledge entails.** I Peter 1:1,2 says that we are “chosen according to the foreknowledge of God, by the sanctifying work of the Spirit, to obey Jesus Christ.” In Acts 2:23, Peter spoke of how Jesus was “delivered over by the designated (horizō) plan and foreknowledge of God”. We have another glimpse into God’s ability to know, or influence, the future in Isaiah 46:9,10, “Remember the former things long past, for I am God, and there is no other; *I am* God, and there is no one like Me, declaring the end from the beginning, and from ancient times things which have not been done, saying, ‘My purpose will be established, and I will accomplish all My good pleasure.’” Cf. Isa. 48:3-20; Psa. 139. **The Bible is full of examples of predictive prophecy.** **God has many times spoken of things that were to come years later, and they came to pass. From this, we can conclude that either He knows the future, or He is influencing the future, or both.**

God does not choose to reveal everything about Himself (Deut. 29:29). **He leaves many questions unanswered.** In the case of the prophet Jeremiah, God told him, “*Before* I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I have appointed you a prophet to the nations” (Jer. 1:5). Paul also saw God’s foreknowledge and calling at work in his life, “...God, who had set me apart *even* from my mother’s womb and called me through His grace...” (Gal. 1:15). In the same way, **God has known you from before birth. He has an important role for you to play in His Kingdom expansion. He has gifted and called you to serve Him.** In order for us to be adequate to serve Christ, ...in order for us to fulfill God’s purpose for our lives..., He had to **call** us to Himself out of our unbelief. Then, He had to remove the barrier that sin caused in our relationship with Him (**justify** = just as if I’d never sinned), so that we could communicate with Him. Finally, He sent His Spirit within us to “**glorify** us”, ...to “light the wick in the lantern” of our hearts..., so that people could see the light of Christ in us (II Cor. 3:1-18). [Our English translations of verse 30, sounds like a logical progression (e.g., foreknowledge leads to predestination, predestination leads to call, ...leads to justification, ...leads to glorification). In the Greek, however, this is *not* clearly stated. It is simply stated that those who will turn out like Jesus are ones who have been invited, they have been justified, they have been glorified. The mechanics of that are not described for us here.] The Spirit is at work to transform us into the image of Christ, so that our lives more clearly convey Him to the world around us. **God can take even the darkest moments of your life to cause Jesus to shine brighter than ever.**