

Being Conformed

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[0:01] I read a portion of Romans chapter 8. Romans 8 is truly one of the glorious portions of Scripture, is it not? I know that's an opinion shared by many, and there's good reason for it.

It's a chapter that richly holds forth the hope and glory and assurance of the gospel. The Apostle Paul's confidence is expressed from his opening declaration, There is, therefore, now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.

To his exuberant closing, I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor heights, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

It is incredible. And the whole thing is worth memorizing. This evening, I want us to consider a verse from this chapter that I think is somewhat overlooked.

And I believe the reason it's overlooked is because its neighbors are so often referred to. The preceding verse, to the one that I'm concerned with tonight, it says this.

[1:08] It says, And we know that those who love God, that for those who love God, all things work together for good for those who are called according to his purpose. That's verse 28 of Romans 8.

And it's often used to remind people in the middle of some trial that God is good, that he is sovereign, that he's going to take the circumstances of our life and work them for good.

And then the one that follows is verse 30. And those whom he predestined, he also called. And those whom he called, he also justified. And those whom he justified, he also glorified. And that's a verse often cited when considering how it is that God and God alone is the author of our salvation. Well, sandwiched in between those two well-rehearsed verses is verse 29, the verse that I think, frankly, is a little overlooked. For those whom he foreknew, he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers.

In some respects, I think verse 29 is an explanation of verse 28. For those who love God, all things work together for good for those who are called according to his purpose. Well, what is his purpose?

[2:20] What is the good that he is working all things toward? Verse 29 tells us, for those whom he foreknew, he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his son.

That is the good that God is working in the circumstances of our lives, to conform us more and more to the image of his son, so that there will be many others who are like him, though he will be the preeminent, of course, of all of them.

And the glorified, at the end of that string of divine actions in verse 30, A string that actually begins in verse 29 describes God's looking upon his project as if it were finished.

And you can't be more glorified than becoming like Jesus. Well, this says two things to me that I want us to consider tonight. One, that God has a vision for each of his children.

And two, he intends to bring it to pass. Now, there's a story in the Bible that I think flushes out this notion, the idea that God has a vision for us, and he works to bring it to pass.

[3:23] You might think of others, but the one that comes to mind for me is the story of Gideon. Now, often, probably, when I mention Gideon, those of you who have been around church for a while, you might think of Gideon, the mighty man of valor, fighting the Midianites with only 300 men.

And you remember that story, how God raised up Gideon to deliver Israel from the oppression of the Midianites. Gideon would end up with only 300 men to fight the vast Midianite horde.

And it's a great scene. One night, Gideon's 300, armed with torches, clay pots, trumpets, and swords, are strategically placed around the encampment of the Midianites. Then at the signal of a single trumpet, all the other trumpets sound.

The clay pots are smashed on the ground. The torches flare up, and they cry out, a sword for the Lord and for Gideon. And the whole setup drives the Midianites into confusion. They start to slay one another.

I mean, who needs 32,000 men to attack an enemy when the enemy will do it for you? Well, it was a rout. Gideon ends up summoning other tribes.

[4 : 26] They pursue the Midianites, finally achieving a decisive victory. And as a result, because of his great courage and determination, the men of Israel want to make him king. Actually encourage a dynasty.

They say, rule over us, you and your son and your grandson also, for you have saved us from the hand of the Midianites. Well, he refuses. But because of his strong leadership, the scripture reports that Midian was subdued before the people of Israel, and they raise their heads no more.

Now, that's pretty much the end of the mighty man of valor part of Gideon's story. But that's not where the story begins. The situation with the Midianites was a difficult one.

Perhaps you're familiar with the repeating cycle of the book of Judges. Israel goes after other gods. God raises up an oppressor to teach them a lesson. Then Israel cries out to God for deliverance. God, in his mercy, raises up a deliverer, who in the book is called a judge.

So it's not the black person, black person in a black robe, sitting, overseeing trials. This is a judge who meets out judgment against these oppressing horrids. And Gideon was just such a judge.

[5 : 36] But as I said, the situation with the Midianites was tough. They were nomadic people who joined with other non-Israelites to trouble Israel. And what would they do?

Well, at harvest time, they would swarm into Israel with their cattle, their tents, and their families. And they would be like locusts on the land. They would devour everything in sight.

The cattle, the crops, leaving nothing for Israelites. Perhaps you've seen the movie of the Magnificent Seven. Have you ever seen that Western? About how it is that there's a small village in Mexico.

And every time the evil Calavera shows up, played by Eli Wallach, of all people, shows up. And what do they do? They come in and they take everything at harvest time. And off they go. And finally, the villagers, they've had enough.

And so they go look for some gunslingers who are going to defend them. And so they bring them all into the village. And they're led by Yul Brenner with his Russian accent in the middle of somewhere in Arizona.

[6 : 32] Who knows how. And what do they do? Well, they indeed, they fight off evil Calavera and all of his hordes and they send them out. Well, that's pretty much the book of Judges. Up comes the invading hordes to take everything.

And along comes another Magnificent Seven to deliver them. One band of bandits after another, followed by one Magnificent Seven after another. Well, when we first meet Gideon, the situation with the Midianites has intimidated him to the point of his threshing out his wheat in a winepress. Now, I don't know how many of you have ever, ever threshed wheat. I don't know. Perhaps you have. But more than likely, you haven't done it in the manner that Gideon was trying to do. And the thing about it is, is that this winepress and this threshing out of wheat really have nothing to do with one another except the fact that they're both agriculturally related.

See, threshing involves a process by which the outside husk, the chaff, is loosened from the grain. You might think of the light brown skin on the monkey nut when you open up its shell.

Well, that's similar to the chaff on the grain. What it needs to be is it needs to be separated from the grain. So what someone in Gideon's day would do is they would pile up the grain on something called the threshing floor, which was an elevated open area of ground exposed to the wind.

[7 : 55] And then they would beat the pile of the chaff to beat the chaff away from the grain. And next, with a shovel-like instrument, they would scoop it up, throw it up into the air so that the wind would drive away the chaff.

And all the falls, the grain, back down to the ground, and they could collect it having cleaned it. Well, on the other hand, a winepress would have been a hollowed-out area of rock or vat-like structure.

And grapes would be put in it, and people would walk around on the grapes in order to squeeze out the juice. And at the bottom of the vat, there would be a spout of some sort that would allow the juice to flow into another container at a lower level.

Now, what's wrong with this picture? A winepress is not an open, flat area with access to wind to clear out the chaff. Nor would it be the size that could accommodate much grain or allow for the easy movement of one doing the threshing.

And yet, that's where Gideon was doing his threshing. Now, when my youngest daughter moved into a flat with a couple of roommates, she called me asking me some advice about how she might attach something to one of her windows.

[9 : 02] Well, it turns out that her window sashes were made of wood. So I assured her that it would be easy for her to secure what she wanted to secure with a screw. She then asked me, I can use a hammer to put in the screw, right?

I paused. I said, well, you use a screwdriver to put in the screw. And she responded somewhat sheepishly, oh, yeah, right, right.

That's Gideon. That's Gideon trying to put a screw in with a hammer as he's threshing wheat out in a winepress. It's in the midst of this absurdity that the angel of the Lord shows up and pronounces, the Lord is with you, oh, mighty man of valor.

I mean, that's a Hebrews 11 type profession of faith if there ever was one. You know, faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction and things not seen. There is little in the present moment to justify the title mighty man of valor.

But that's just the point. See, God has a vision for Gideon. And through the arc of his story, we see how patiently God and graciously God draws him into fulfilling that vision.

[10 : 12] My wife and I, right, you know that we've come from New York City and we have six children. Living in New York City, that means two things. One, my wife's only competition in childbearing were Hasidic Jews.

Secondly, we spent a lot of time in playgrounds. In the city, that's what you do with your kids. At least when they were young, you go to the playground. You don't send them out to the backyard or down to the street, you know, to the park.

You go with them to the playground. And the not unfamiliar sight is to see a parent take a child and put him or her up at the top of a very tall slide.

And it's clear by what unfolds that unbeknownst to the child, this is a big, big day. It's obvious that the child has never been up there before. And now some kids, well, they just go down, right?

No fear. Those are the ones who end up in the Royal Marines later. But for a lot of kids, it can be intimidating. So the father picks up his son, steps up as high as he can on the ladder.

[11 : 14] He sits him down at the top of the slide. And he sees that his son is anxious. He takes his son's hands and he has him grip the sides of the slide. Then he places his hands over his son's hand and says reassuringly, Now, Tommy, hold on to the sides.

Just hold on and wait till I'm at the bottom. This is going to be fun. You'll see, okay? And Tommy kind of nods his head, but he's not totally convinced. And the father runs down to the bottom of the slide, crouches slightly right with his arms out.

Okay, okay, buddy, let's go. Nothing. Oh, come on, buddy. Come on, you can do it. Let go. It's going to be nothing. And Tommy starts to whimper.

Oh, oh, Tommy. Tommy, boy, don't be afraid. It'll be all right. I'm right here. Come on. Let go. Come on. I'll be right here. When you slide down, I'll be right here at the bottom.

Still nothing. And then with an even more reassuring tone. Tommy, buddy, you can trust me. Just let go of the sides and I will be right here when you slide down at the bottom.

[12 : 20] I know you can do it. And Tommy looks at his father. Father nods in encouragement. Finally, Tommy closes his eyes. He lets go. His eyes pop open as the rushing movement and wide eyed.

He's gathered up through his father's arm. The boy's exhilarated. The father's hugging him, congratulating him. You did it. That was great. Oh, well done. What a brave guy. Thomas the Brave. What's going on? Well, the child is fearful, right? The child's fearful. I mean, the descent looks ominous. For a little kid, it's a long way down.

He's never done this before. Yet for the parent, well, the parent knows it's going to be okay. He also knows that once his son gets over the fear, he'll be able to do it again.

Well, this not unusual playground scene. A father who has a vision for his child, coaxing him along. So that he will experience and grow from what he has planned for him. It's much like how God works in us.

[13 : 20] To bring us. To bring to pass in us the vision that he has for us. If you go and read through the whole of the Gideon account. I think you'll find that God is very patient in drawing Gideon into the role that he has for him.

When the angel first confronts him. Gideon's response is to question God's care for Israel. If the Lord is with us, why then has all this happened to us? And where are all the wonderful deeds that our fathers recounted us?

Saying, did not the Lord bring us up out of Egypt? But now the Lord has forsaken us and given us into the hand of Midian. But the angel of the Lord turns to him and says, go in this might of yours and save Israel from the hand of Midian.

Do I not send you? And then he offers some excuses to why he's not the right man for the job. And he said, please, Lord, how can I save Israel? Behold, my clan is the weakest in Manasseh. And I'm the least of my father's house.

Gideon's not persuaded. So he wants to be sure that the one speaking with him is really from the Lord. He asks this, if I found favor in your eyes and show me a sign that it is you who speaks with me.

[14 : 26] Please do not depart from here until I come to you and bring out my present and set it before you. So what does Gideon do? He goes and prepares some food and he presents it to the angel. The angel tells him to put it down on a rock, which Gideon does.

And the angel of the Lord who touches the rock with his staff and suddenly all the food is immediately consumed. So it's a sign. And Gideon throughout this narrative needs and receives a tremendous amount of encouragement to keep moving forward, including when he puts his famous fleeces out, right?

If you'll save me by my hand, as you've said, behold, I'm laying a fleece of wool on the threshing floor. If there is dew on the fleece alone, it's dry in the ground. Then I shall know that you will save Israel by my hand, as you have said.

And what does the Lord do? He actually wets the fleece and leaves the ground dry. And when Gideon asked to do the opposite, dew on the ground but not on the fleece, again, the Lord complies.

And then in a final act to persuade his not-so-mighty man of valor, the Lord sends him down near the enemy camp to hear a man tell of a dream that he had. Gideon, the son of Joash, the man of Israel, God has given into his hand Midian and all the camp.

[15 : 40] And you know what? All that coaxing finally works. Gideon, Gideon's response to overhearing the dream, he lets go and he slides down.

The scripture says that he worshipped and returned to the camp of Israel and said, Arise, for the Lord has given the host of Midian into our hands. From fear-filled thresher of wheat in a winepress to a mighty man of valor.

The Lord has a vision for Gideon, declared it as done even when there was no reason to think it would come to pass. And then he makes it happen. When the apostle speaks as he does in the Romans' passages, that God has predestined us to be conformed to the image of his son, are we not to assume that everything in our life, even the most difficult challenges, have that good and gracious end in mind?

I want to share a story that puts some flesh on this idea. And it involves a situation that's existed in America. And I hope I can make it enough clear so it doesn't just all sound like something that you can't grasp.

And you might be familiar with it already. It involves an accumulation of sorrows for a young black man named John Perkins, growing up in the middle of the 20th century in the dark cloud of deep south Jim Crow, Mississippi.

[17 : 05] Now, if you're not familiar, Jim Crow is not a town or a city in the American state of Mississippi. It was the name given to a state of affairs in Mississippi and other southern states from the end of the 19th century to about two-thirds of the 20th century.

As explained, from the late 1870s until the triumphs of the civil rights movement in the 1950s and 60s, regimented racial segregation blighted America's water fountains, restrooms, restaurants, lodgings, and transportation, along with separate but equal schools.

There were literally signs, literally two different water fountains. Blacks can drink from this one. Whites will drink from this one. Blacks enter this door. Whites enter this door. Whites go through the

front door.

Blacks go through the side door. There's a restaurant. They get served out of the side. Buses, the blacks sit at the back. Whites get to sit in the front. These were called Jim Crow laws.

And this legislated segregation of races, white and black, created an atmosphere in which white men could abduct and hang, what we call lynching, a black man, at the mere whiff of impropriety as judged by their white supremacist ideology.

[18:14] They could do this and they could do it with impunity. All white juries would convict blacks and acquit whites, no matter how innocent the black or how guilty the white. This was the environment that this young man, John Perkins, grew up in.

Just seven months after he was born, his mother died from a debilitating illness that was directly related to the poverty that dominated her life. Soon after that, his father left, leaving him, as he testifies, a weight, a need for relationship that remained unmet for me for much of the rest of my life. He was part of a sharecropping family, a system in that part of the world that amounted to nothing more than a new form of slavery. that they had supposedly been delivered from. The demands of the hard work meant that time in school was determined by the needs of the harvest.

As a result, despite being 15 years old, he left school having completed no more than the fifth grade. His experience of exploitation became personal when after working all day for a white farmer and expecting to be paid a dollar, he received 15 cents.

I could hardly believe it, he said. 15 cents! I had earned it, but I didn't know whether to take the money or not. I was afraid. Afraid if I accepted the money, I would hate myself for taking it.

[19:29] Afraid, too, if I didn't take the money, the man would say I was an uppity, bigoted nigger, or maybe a smart nigger. At that time in Mississippi, it was tough enough to just be called black, but being known as a smart nigger would have been unbearable.

He was only 12 years old, but it was, he reports, my first face-to-face encounter with the system. He also learned early on that the only identity he had, as far as white people were concerned, was the fact that he lived on a white man's plantation.

His own name meant nothing. Back then, he relates, if a black child met an older white person, the white's first words would be, what place you live on, boy? I wasn't anybody all by myself, or even by who my family was, my own name.

I had no significance, only the name of the man on whose land that I lived. Then, when John was 16 years of age, his beloved older brother, a decorated veteran of World War II, was unjustly gunned down by a white marshal, a white police officer.

John thought, all that army stuff about making the world safe for democracy, all that fighting for some place off in Europe didn't get him killed. He had to come home safe from the white man's war, only to be shot down six months later by a white man in his hometown.

[20:52] A few months later, John left for California. From that distance, he could see, quote, in Mississippi, every move I made was defined in terms of race. I worked on farms and fields, I behaved in certain ways for my employers, and I received certain wages.

All of this defined in terms of my blackness. And in every one of these areas, there were different standards for whites. In California, John met Jesus.

And he says he sensed the beginning of a whole new life, a new structure of life. And believe it or not, God coaxed him back to Mississippi, the place that he had fled.

And at great personal cost, including being viciously beaten to the brink of death by a vengeful, bigoted police, and subsequently suffering through a grievous miscarriage of justice, he became an agent of profound change.

His experience of racism that manifested in economic exploitation, a lack of education, a broken family, shaped him into a powerful advocate for justice, peace, economic opportunity, and racial reconciliation.

[22:00] And he says this, I know why the Lord saved me, he says, and I know why he led me back to Mississippi. In a land where hatred once reigned unchallenged, I have already seen God in his glory carve out a pocket of love.

John is now 92 years old, and he wrote that statement over 40 years ago. And his life has since then been one of constantly carving out pockets of love in the name of Jesus.

Now, I recognize that our brother's story is a sober one, an extreme example to illustrate the notion that God uses what transpires in our life to shape us according to the vision that he has for us.

For John, it was to be an agent of grace and love back in Mississippi. But sometimes, by seeing how God has been faithful in unimaginable circumstances, we can gain hope for ours. And thankfully, not many of us will have to bear what our brother has had to bear. But I know, I know that many of you have faced or are facing even now circumstances that, for you, are profoundly challenging.

[23 : 14] Now, sometimes, you wonder, like Gideon, if God is with you, why are you going through such pain and confusion? Well, let's look back at our passage, Romans 8, 28 through 30, briefly.

He says, and we know that for those who love God, all things work together for good. And we know for those who love God.

And you do love God. And the reason you first love God is because he first loved you. And the love you possess for God is evidence of God's love for you. And knowing that God loves you, we can try to look at our present trial from a different angle.

It's not arbitrary. It's not a product of bad luck. It came to you as an outworking of God's love for you. And we know that all things, for those who love God, all things work together for good.

All things. All things involves a universal statement. It encompasses everything that is going on in your life. And everything going on in your life is something that God is using for his good end.

[24 : 23] For those who are called according to his purpose. Now, I don't want to be glib. You know, there's no point in being glib in times of people who are suffering and in trial. To throw out a Bible verse and say, hey, God's going to work it all out.

That's not the way it feels. Like Gideon, we wonder just what is going on. But we are to be reminded that God has called us according to his purpose.

It's not easy, but the trial that has you perplexed, that has you weighed down, fearful, is actually part of the calling that God has for you. And the call always has an object.

It has a purpose. And this is a purpose that has existed before the world was even formed because he knew you even then and predestined you to be conformed to the image of Jesus.

For those whom he foreknew, Paul writes, he also predestined. He predestined them to be conformed to the image of his Son in order that he, Jesus, might be the firstborn among many brothers.

[25 : 27] And as God looks upon us, we as his loving project shaping us more and more into the image of Christ using the very trials of our life that we wish were not there, God has put into our lives as a means of grace, as a means of blessing and outpouring of his love.

And how does God look upon us? Those he has predestined, he calls. It's a sure thing. And those whom he calls, he justifies. It's something that God accomplishes, declares us to be righteous.

And those whom he justifies, he also glorified. Amazing that he puts that in the past tense as though it's a completed act. God looks upon us as a finished project.

in Christ. And he's using everything in our lives to shape us and mold us into the vision that he has for us. Toward the end of chapter 8, Paul asks, He who did not spare his own son, but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?

And you can hear, can't you, Paul's confidence in God's provision, how it's grounded in God's gracious gift. If God is willing to do that for us, he's musing, how will he not also meet us in every challenge?

[26 : 43] And Paul had challenges. He suffered much, but he considered that the sufferings of this present time were not worth comparing with the glory that was to be revealed to him and in him.

That glory, which will ultimately be fully realized when we stand face to face with our Savior, is something that we can share even now as we are more and more conformed to his image by our Heavenly Father's hand according to his vision.

Perhaps, in the midst of the fear, the anxiety, the doubt that such circumstances create, you might hear your father's voice lovingly urging you to trust him.

He has a vision for you and it has him right in the middle of the trial with you. And like the father at the playground, he's standing at the end of what troubles you and he's there urging you to let go of the sides of the slide and be received into his loving arms.

Let's pray. Father God, we know that you do indeed take everything that's going on in our lives and you use it to your good end. We confess, God, we confess that we're not happy about that at times, that it doesn't sit well with us because we wonder like Gideon, if you were for us, why is it that we're going through this?

But God, we see that you have a greater purpose than just our immediate belief. A greater purpose is that we would experience what our Lord and Savior experienced, that he was made perfect through suffering, that his entire life was fully realized when he indeed went through the suffering in Calvary.

[28 : 29] Lord, we know that our suffering does not redeem anybody, it doesn't save anybody from eternal judgment, but it does have a purpose, a purpose that you envision.

And we pray that in the middle of it, Lord, you would help us to see, help us to have eyes to see what you're doing and give us a confidence, a confidence of your love, of your care, of the assurance that you have that we will be okay.

And that we might, like that child on the slide, be able to trust you, to let go, and to trust that you will be there at the end. Lord, again, we confess we need you in this.

We need the work of your spirit in our lives to bring that kind of confidence into us, that kind of assurance. Lord, we give you thanks that your word is true, that Jesus did indeed live die, rose again, and ascended to the right hand of God.

We thank you, Lord, again for the outpouring of your spirit, and we ask, Lord, that you would do that to us afresh, that we might trust you in all things. In Jesus' name, amen.