

A Plan that Cannot be Thwarted

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[0 : 0 0] I wonder if you've ever frequented those eating establishments that by the nature of their menus and the way they work, they encourage you to overeat. And think of these all-you-can-eat buffets, you know, where there's things you keep going back until you've received your fill.

Or I remember a breakfast dish in one establishment, and it had so many items on the plate, they just entitled it, The Works. Well, really, Romans chapter 8, in spiritual terms, is really all-you-can-eat and the works. It is so extensive and so full. Even just as we read that passage, I read it myself, I'm quite daunted at how little I'm going to deal with in my sermon with regard to these great verses. In the 1960s, Dr. Martin Lloyd-Jones in Westminster Chapel preached 36 sermons on the portion that we've just read. So we're going to be here a wee while. No, no, we're not.

But it's a measure of the fullness of this passage. I've also been, I think, about four or five occasions. I've heard Sinclair Ferguson preach on that passage, and no two of them, the sermons, were the same. There were just so many different ways it can be looked at. In fact, I once heard Sinclair talk about that. He actually looks at scriptures this way generally, but it's certainly this passage. It's almost like he sees, like there's almost threads running through the passage.

And he just takes a thread and then works his way through that. Now, I'm not Sinclair Ferguson, but I do want to follow one particular thread. It's to work through all the veritable treasure that there is in the rich spiritual truth in this passage. And I want to just look at it from the point of view, although there are many more things that could be said, I want to limit myself to the notion that God has a plan, and it's a plan that cannot be thwarted, and it's a plan that cannot fail.

And that's very important for us to know as Christian believers. In all the changing seasons and circumstances of our lives, especially when we face times of trouble, times of hardship, times of difficulty, it can be a real foundation for us, a bulwark for us, if we come to the biblical truth that as Christian believers, a Lord has a plan for us, and that plan cannot be thwarted, and cannot fail.

[3 : 0 1] I'm not an aficionado of Robert Burns, but one of the best-known quotes is from his poem, To a Moose. And he writes there, The best laid schemes of mice and men gang after glade.

It means the best laid plans of mice and men often go wrong. It's a well-known phrase because, of course, John Steinbeck took up the phrase and used it as a title for a short story he wrote, simply entitled, Of Mice and Men.

And it's that truth that we know in human life generally, that our plans often go wrong. We've got plans and purposes, but they often unfold in a very different fashion that we might imagine they do.

And that's very much a human experience for us all. I read about, way back in the 1970s, for those of you who can remember that, Pepsi-Cola had an advertising campaign, and the campaign was, Come Alive with Pepsi.

Do you remember that particular advert? Well, it did. And it was very successful as a business, except in China and the countries around China.

[4 : 22] In actual fact, the advert was brought out and their sales dropped. And they realised that there was a subtle nuance to do with the Mandarin language. So that when in English it sounds like, Come Alive with Pepsi, to those speaking Mandarin, it sounded, Drink Pepsi, and your ancestors will come alive.

Ah, the best laid plans. That's not the way with the large plans. They never fail. They cannot be thwarted. And I want us to think something about the nature of this plan, because it can be a great source of encouragement.

And the first thing I want you to realise is that as Paul writes this, he's indicating us as Christians that we have something that is worth waiting for. Something worth waiting for.

Look with me, if you will, at chapter 17 and read from that into chapter 18. Now, if we are children, and then we are heirs, heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory, I can say that our present sufferings are not worth comparing that the glory of the glory that will be revealed in us.

We have something to look forward to. Perhaps you can remember a time when round about, when we get into the new year, one of the things that happens in the new year, we used to get festooned with brochures for places to go on holiday.

[5 : 57] It's always very significant. They sent them to you in January. You know, when things are miserable outside, pictures of sunshine, something to look forward to. Well, it doesn't happen that much anymore, and I don't know if it ever really worked.

But the Christian believer has something to look forward to. Even, says Paul, as you go through times of hardship, we have a glory that we will inherit. We have a promise from the Lord that we can look forward to.

We will inherit glory. We will occupy a new world, and we will be a new people and a renewed people. Notice, particularly in verse 18, this glory is not something that just comes to us, but also will be in us, writes the Apostle Paul.

And our minds should be on these things. Our minds should be focused on the glory that lies before us. There used to be a saying that went around in Christian circles.

You'll perhaps never know. Now, sometimes they'll say about a certain Christian believer, they'll say, see him or see her. They're too heavenly minded to be of any earthly use. It's actually nonsense.

[7 : 17] There's almost a sense of which we almost cannot be too heavenly minded. We live in a time when people think too much about the here and now, and it pervades the spirit of the Christian church.

It's the world, as it were, coming in, the spirit of the world coming in. We have a glorious prospect, and we should be looking forward to it, and we should be living our lives now in the prospect of its coming.

It should shape us. But the passage does say the Christian life will be characterized by suffering at the present time.

It actually says that this is part of the aspect that we are actually sharing in some sense, Christ's suffering in the present. But the good news about that is that we also will share in its glory in the future.

That's the thing that we have to look forward to. Now, the passage doesn't play down the fact of suffering. The New Testament very rarely does.

[8 : 31] It doesn't give any implication that we will be immune to it. We are encouraged to see it as part of the present fallen age.

The age that we will deliver from. The age that we will be rescued from. But the difference, as I say, for the Christian is we have that hope.

We have that something to look forward to. We have something worth waiting for. But I want you to notice in the first part of the passage we are reading that we're not the only ones who are doing the waiting.

Did you notice that? Verse 19. For creation waits in eager expectation of the children of God to be revealed. The word that is used there for waiting in that verse is also the word that is used of animals keeping watch.

Keeping watch for predators coming. I don't know about the way my mind works. I think of that old documentary of the meerkats standing on two legs watching for predators coming.

[9 : 40] That was long before they were superstars selling car insurance. You know, they were just wildlife then. Well, that's the image. That's the picture. That's the picture. There's an eager anticipation.

The kind of eager anticipation we see in the part of the youngsters coming up to this time of the year, a Christmas or a birthday. They can't wait. Well, here, Paul is saying the creation is like that.

And that's part of the big Bible story, isn't it? Goes right back to the book of Genesis. Where mankind has been bestowed the privilege of being the viceroy for the created order.

But when man fell, the whole created order fell with him. But we don't often think about this. The fault and the blame lies with man.

The created order has no blame, but it suffers with us. For the creation was subjected to frustration.

[10 : 51] Not by its own choice, says Paul, you see. But by the will of the one who subjected it. In hope that the creation itself would be liberated from its bondage to the grave.

And brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God. That's quite something to think about. The whole created order is waiting for mankind to be restored and made right with God through the power of the gospel.

And it's all out of disjunction for the present time. One writer, Charles Ernest Berlin Cranfield, that's a name and a half, suggested an image in his comment to Romans.

He says, it's a bit like having a great symphony orchestra gathered together in the Royal Albert Hall. Everybody's waiting to hear this symphony played. But the problem is, there's no conductor.

The conductor is, on his own, writing his own music. The created order is like the orchestra waiting for mankind to be restored.

[12 : 06] To give the creation its real purpose once more. But humanity is like the conductor. Doing his own thing. Writing its own music.

And while he's doing that, the creation is groaning. Longing for that redemption. And it's been growing for some time now.

But in actual fact, this Paul, not only the creation is growing for the redemption, but according to verse 23, we ourselves, the children of God, are longing for that day.

We have been a great destiny in store for us, but there's a vast disparity, isn't there, between that great prospect and the present reality we experience, isn't there?

In the present age, we often sense that frustration, even with our own spiritual lives. They seem inadequate.

[13 : 11] And Paul's not talking from an ivory tower position. Those of you who know Romans chapter 7, quite a difficult chapter. But the one thing you can assure about, Paul is quite wretched in that time.

He knows what it is to have the sense of frustration. It's all part of the not yet of Christian salvation. You see, when we become Christians, there are many blessings that are ours, but there are many more that are yet to come.

Now, in some Christian circles, that balance is often reversed. They want it to be all now.

And I can understand why it's for an evangelistic reason. A number of folks down where I used to minister, they used to have a phrase, sometimes people would say to them, oh, you want me to come and listen to this gospel?

It's all pie in the sky while you die. And they used to reply, their stock answer was, oh, no, it's steak on the plate while you wait. There's blessings now.

[14 : 19] There is. But the greater weight of them is the not yet. Because we're not the kind of people we ought to be. But if you look at verse 18, our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.

There is so much more to come. And the Spirit, he says, groans with us as we struggle to bring these matters in prayer before the Lord.

There's a lot of groaning going on. The creation, we ourselves, and the Spirit himself. Three great groaners in this passage. Let's move on to consider the rest of the chapter.

Really, Paul gives three reasons why the plans of the Lord can never be thwarted and can never fail. Firstly, according to verse 28, it cannot fail because the Lord suffers no unforeseen accidents.

And we know that in all things, God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. Your plans fail all the time.

[15 : 35] That's because we're human. That's because we're finite. That's because we're fallible. Unlike the Lord, we cannot see the future.

We have no control over it. That's not the way with the Lord. Nothing is left to chance or good fortune. So we should really, perhaps, alter our view of our circumstances in that life.

Even when we suffer, even when we face hard times, we should see it all within the plan or the purpose of God. Because that's what Paul's saying here.

He's saying that God is looking for our ultimate good. Importantly, we see our ultimate good or the good as we would see it. God never promised to break all things together for our comfort.

God never promised to put all things together for our pleasure. It's for our good. Sometimes it's difficult when we can't see that.

[16 : 44] It's also, though that's the case, we're told in Scripture, we're to accept that word. We may never see it, even in our lifetime. It's a bit like a tapestry.

I went to see, years and years ago, the Bayou Tapestry in Bayou, in Northern France. That's a magnificent thing to see. But there's always, the side that you see of the tapestry is all the picture perfectly formed.

If you see people who do a tapestry, you go to the backside. Well, it's a mess. There's wee bits of thread and string and wool all over the place. And the image is that for us, when we look at our lives, it's like looking at the reverse side of a tapestry.

But the real truth is what God sees and what God's doing. And it's glorious to behold. We're called to trust the Lord. There are all times.

But He has His plan and nothing can thwart them. The second reason His plan cannot be thwarted is that there are no weak links in the chain of His plan. And I'm really thinking there about, as He goes on, verses 29 to verse 30.

[18 : 00] And there are these various steps that, with the way God works for certain people, those He foreknew, He also predestined. Those He predestined, He also called.

Those He called, He also justified. You see, there are no weak links in that chain. Anne Robbins says, nowhere to be seen in the weak and slink.

No. It's certain to take place and certain to transpire. And there's something, if we really understand these things, it really is very important.

It can be of great assurance to us. Those God foreknew. We mustn't think here, it's the notion that God knew that we were going to respond to the gospel and we were going to become Christians in advance.

That minimizes the enormity of that verb and what it means. You see, in Hebrew culture, to know someone was more than just having a passing acquaintance with someone.

[19 : 08] It was much deeper than that. And so, when those in Hebrew and Jewish culture spoke of it being known by God, it actually implied a very intimate relationship.

It was not just that God knew who we were, but there was that covenant fellowship, that shared personal fellowship. And what Paul is saying is that for every believer, that is God's relationship with His children the minute they put their faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

It's a working out of God's foreknowledge. And it's something that is very important to realize, that God is at the head.

God is the one that calls to Himself. That's designed to give us comfort and assurance of salvation. Those He foreknewed, He predestined.

And those He predestined, He also called. Why is that important in assurance? Well, if we really thought our salvation was really up to us, it would be a pretty precarious thing, wouldn't it?

[20 : 27] Because we can be pretty fickle human beings. Maybe sometimes we might then be let it out. Well, maybe when I made that commitment and I went through whatever was involved in joining the church that I was in, maybe that was just me kidding myself at that time.

You know, all sorts of doubts, can I say? When you realize it's God's at that helm, that changes the thing entirely. We're in God's hands. No one can snatch us out of our hands, out of His hands.

There are no weak links in the Lord's plan. There's an old American preacher called Harry Ironside who was sharing his faith with a non-Christian at one time and he was talking about how the Lord had sought him, the Lord had found him, had loved him, delivered him, saved him and cleansed him.

And the person he was speaking to said, did you not do anything? What about your part? Oh, yes, I am, I've got a part. Yes, my part was running away. And the Lord pursued me until he found me.

He was giving all glory to God. All his security was in the work of Christ. And even, isn't it interesting the way that Paul, when he speaks about being glorified, it's in the past tense.

[21 : 52] This is the part that we think is the future, and we do, but sometimes the apostle Paul does it in his writing. He speaks about something that is yet to transpire, uses the past tense, because it is that certain this is the outcome.

Because as God has begun this good work within us, as Christian believers, we will be glorified. It is that certain. That is why he uses the past tense.

The third reason the plan cannot fail is because nothing can obstruct its fulfillment. Well, these great verses at the end, the various five unanswerable questions, I heard Sinclair Ferguson, a podcast say recently, that there ought to be something surprises about the question being who.

It's almost as though he said, you would expect it to be what? What can separate us from the love of Christ? But he doesn't. He says, who?

And it's really the aspect of spiritual opposition. The devil, the accuser. You can see that there, implied there in verse 34, who is he that condemns?

[23 : 18] He constantly seeks to work in a very subtle way in our lives to hold us back, sometimes presenting us with the prospect of a sin. How is it he works?

He comes along and he says, well, why don't you just go ahead? Everybody's doing it these days. What's holding you back? Trying to entice us to fall to that temptation.

But then, characteristically, if we do, then he changes his face and he comes to us and says, ha, now you've done it. Child of God, don't make me laugh.

You think you can serve God? And the devil actually says, Paul is the one who is really deceived. Because he imagines that these accusations can be brought against the children of God and that they will stick.

But the apostle Paul says, no, Jesus Christ has already borne them for us. He becomes, as John says in the letter, our advocate.

[24 : 37] I love that description of our Lord Jesus. We have an advocate with the Father. That's something to think about. In the old days, I don't know how many of you remember, I don't, it's before my time, there was a legal program called Perry Mason.

And the thing about Perry Mason was he never lost a case. Apparently. I've got two lawyers in my family and they tell me that's just nonsense. Everybody loses cases.

Fiction. But in the court of heaven, we have an advocate for the Father who never loses a case.

And of course, that's because of his method, isn't it? Because when these accusations come, he says, I have borne the price.

This child is one of mine. That's why John Newton can write in his hymn, I may my fierce accuser face and tell him thou hast died.

[25 : 52] And that makes us think of verse 32 there, that great verse, he who did not spare his own son, but gave him up for us all.

How will he not, along with him, graciously give us all things? It's clearly an allusion to Genesis chapter 22, where Abraham takes Isaac up to the mountain.

And then God withholds his hand and a lamb is prepared. But you know very well, my friends, that in Calvary, the narrative was different.

Because in Calvary, the dagger was plunged into the son's heart. And that makes all the difference to our standing.

That's what adds great security. We are the ones for whom Christ has died and laid down our life. That's why nothing can separate us from his love.

[27 : 01] That's why all these things that come, life, death, demons, angels, present, future, nothing can separate us from him. Once we close, we should say that this is a great plan God has.

Sorry, what is the plan? Oh yes, it was there in the middle. I wonder if you noticed it. For those God foreknew, he also predestined, here it comes, to be conformed to the likeness of his son.

You see, God might have many and various plans for each of us as believers, but for every single one of us, he has this plan to make us like his own son.

I wonder how many of us would ever be bold enough to say that our ambition is to be like Jesus. God's plan and purpose for each and every one of you.

Obviously, there are limitations to that, but you know what I mean. There are areas where we should be more like Jesus. That's God's plan and purpose.

[28 : 21] That's the good that he's working for. That's what sets, as it were, our sufferings in context because God wants to make us like his son.

He was testing. We'll be testing. We should look to the good that the Lord plans for us, realizing it doesn't depend on our works, but leaning on him and trusting on him every single day, knowing that he has a plan, a plan that cannot fail, a plan that cannot be thwarted.

No power in heaven and earth can ever frustrate the plans that the Lord has, and in particular, the Lord has for us as we do.

through the hope good. No power them. It's just not enough to get to the hope to understand what how they tie to sleep or in the low hope till