

Facing life with confidence

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[0 : 00] Hey everyone, my name's Aidan and I'm a long-time sermon listener and a first-time sermon giver. As I said earlier, I've been coming to St. Paul since the beginning of 2021 and this is my first time preaching here. And if you've ever heard of my thoughts on preaching before, you know that I really like slides, so I get ready for a lot of that today. But if we haven't met before, I would love to get to know you. Feel free to come and chat to me after the service. I'd love to hear what you think of my second sermon ever. But we've got an excellent passage to get into today, as Gary just said. So how about we start by praying. So if you'd like to pray with me. Lord, in an uncertain world, you have an unstoppable plan. Please reveal that plan to us in all its glory today. Amen.

All right, I wanted to start today by us having a chat. I reckon sermons are actually a group activity. So I want you to find a person nearby, could be the same person you chatted to earlier, or someone different. Or if you're at home, turn to the people next to you or sit and have a think.

I want you to have a chat about where do you think you'll be in five years. You can share as much or as little as you would like, doesn't have to be deep. But I want you to think about what you plus five years will look like. What will you be doing? Where will you be living? Still around here? What version iPhone will we be up to? What do you think your life will look like in 2027? You've got two and a half minutes, and then we'll come back together. So have a chat. All right, we might start coming back together. I hope you've been having some interesting chats. I reckon that's a really interesting question because it shows something about our attitudes to plans, and specifically plans for the future. We're going to talk a lot about plans today because the passage we just read is all about God's good plan for life. And the first point this passage makes about God's plan is that it is for good. Have a look at verse 28 with me. 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. If you've been with us for the last few weeks, you know that in the last couple of chapters, Paul has been constructing a framework for how Christians should think about the sin, the law, and God. And specifically, Paul's argument in these chapters has had momentum, a directed energy and emotion to it, as if it's been building to something. It's as if Paul's been building a tower, starting with the theological foundations and then working its way up. He starts with...

Oh, don't look. There you go. He starts with, So if you're just joining us for the first time, know that you've joined us at a fantastic moment, just as we see the conclusion of all of Paul's reasoning and logic, just as we get to the pointy end of the tower and the end to the first half of Romans. And the first building block in Paul's logical capstone here is God's purpose for a Christian's new spirit-filled life. And that purpose is for good. Let's look back at verse 28. And we know that in all things, God works for the good of those who love him. As Christians, I think we understand the idea that we'll end up in a good place. Like if you imagine the timeline of your life, we look forward when we get to heaven, where life will finally be good. But I'm not sure we really grasp the idea that God is using every single moment of our lives now for good. And I think there's two parts of this plan that we don't really get. Firstly, we don't feel the true scale and depth of this plan. Every day, every minute, every hour, every second, every feeling, every word, every breath. What would it mean for God to use every one of your breaths for good? If all, and feel the weight of that word with me, if all things are to be used by God for good, then there is no exception. There is nothing that God cannot, will not, and has not used for his plan. Secondly, with the massive scale of this plan, how can it be that all of a

[5 : 04] Christian's life is used for good? Given the incredible range of experiences we have, how can we truthfully say that both holidays and heartbreak lead to the same result? What a claim. And I think we struggle with this because the concept of good for us is so firmly rooted in the present. To have a good day means that you are happy today, or at least happier today than you were yesterday. To try and understand this, I spent the last month listening to a bunch of music, all songs with the same name, The Good Life. Now, if you're a musician trying to name a song, please don't name it The Good Life.

There's at least 30 other songs with that title. Anyway, so I've been listening to The Good Life by various artists, and an interesting theme I found amongst many of them, and especially those released in the last 20 years, is that the good life is now. Here's a line from Kanye, and I won't sing it for you. A, this is The Good Life. This is The Good Life. One Republic says, oh, this has got to be The Good Life. This has got to be The Good Life. Summer Kennedy says, it feels like the world is ours. Oh, yeah, this is The Good Life. And then there's my favourite lyricist, Ben Soule, who writes, yeah, The Good Life. Yeah, The Good Life. Oh, The Good Life. Yeah, The Good Life. And then finally, there's the voice of a generation, Hannah Montana. This is The Good Life. Take a look. Have anything you want.

My theory is that in 2022, The Good Life has to be right now, because it can't happen anywhere else. We're more aware than ever that the oppression of minorities and the discrimination of those outside the mainstream, and the past, frankly, was really bad for significant portions of Australia.

And the future can look pretty grim, with climate change and global conflict brewing that threatens the world. The only thing we can do is enjoy today. So today has to be The Good Life.

Yet God's plans, and frankly, I'm amazed by this, aren't just counter-cultural, but culturally fulfilling. If all things are worked by God for good, it means that today isn't the only good day.

[7 : 18] Yesterday was used for good, and tomorrow will be used for good as well. Now, this verse doesn't say that all things are good or will feel good. The guarantee of the Bible is that, as a Christian, there is a purpose and intent to your days. And that intent is a good one.

And if God uses all our days for good, then Christians can do something truly revolutionary. Any luck? We can relax.

Relax. Christians can relax. The secular world leaves relaxation for when life is going right. But for the Christian, even if life isn't going as you expected, even if today is really hard, even if your life plan has gone completely off track, we know that God is using everything for good.

We are freed from the pressure of needing things to go right because the universe is not run by chance or dependent entirely on our own actions or run by a distant, uncaring entity or by some indifferent system of justice.

We are wrapped in the strong, caring hands of our Father. When life goes wrong, it can feel like it doesn't matter, but God's plan includes the little things, the good things, the hard things, the sad things, and all of that plan is for good.

[8 : 43] So we can take the pressure off our life and relax by trusting in God's plan. But God's plan isn't just some vague, general, nice idea of good.

It's actually a very specific, detailed plan that ends in our glorification. Now, Romans 8 verse 28 is what I like to call a curly font verse. It's something you might see in a Facebook post, in fancy writing, or cross-stitched onto the wall of the house.

It's used as a general encouragement to Christians, a nice and important thing to read in your day. But here's the thing. If you just read Romans 8 verse 28, you miss out on the details of God's plan.

You know what he's trying to get to, his general aim, but you don't know how he's actually going to get it done. That's why you have to read Romans 8 verse 28 with 8, 29, and 30.

So let's have a look at it now. All right. For those God foreknew, he also predestined, to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters.

[9 : 51] And those he predestined, he also called. Those he called, he also justified. Those he justified, he also glorified. In these verses, Paul describes the steps in God's plan.

And he portrays these steps as an inevitable logical progression, unbreakable chain of actions, where each step naturally follows into the next, from foreknowledge all the way to glorification.

So join me as we dive in and have a look at each section of this chain. Unfortunately, we have to start with the trickiest verb, foreknew.

Now, the dictionary definition foreknew is to be aware of before it happens. And if you think of God simply being aware of us in advance, you might think of God in the beginning of time, looking ahead and seeing whether or not we would freely choose to be a Christian.

But if this were the case, it presents a tension with the rest of Romans in the last couple of weeks. How can we choose to be saved if Paul has so fiercely said that we are incapable of our own salvation?

[10 : 54] Well, the English word here is foreknew, but the original work in Greek actually is the sense of a much stronger, more intimate relationship. It's actually an older Hebrew term that God uses here, which means a God-initiated relationship.

Rather than God knowing our choices before we make them, think instead of God reaching out and loving us in a personal, real way before we even existed. God puts his love on us.

He didn't just foresee what we'll do. He initiated a relationship with us entirely of his own will. But there's a problem. How can God have a relationship with us before we existed?

Well, if it's true that God foreknew us before time, it must also therefore be true that God predestined us, a word meaning determined in advance by divine will or fate.

So God, in his complete control over time and space, determined before the beginning of the universe that our lives would result in a relationship with him. Now, this isn't the sermon to go into the complexity of predestination, but if you have questions about it, feel free to come up and ask me about them later, and then we can go to Steve together and he can actually answer them for us.

[12 : 09] But this also isn't the passage to interrogate the nitty-gritty of predestination, God's will and sovereignty. Paul mentions predestination here not to explain it, but to show the consequences of it.

Because there's an issue that arises from God having a relationship with us in the here and now. How can God have a relationship with us if we're stuck on earth and God's in an entirely separate heavenly realm?

Well, that's why the next step in the chain is that God calls us to come to him. He summons us to be close to him, a spiritual calling to live God's way and to come into his presence, the source of life, grace, mercy, peace, justice.

Although we are not physically called into God's temple, the spiritual summons is by no means any less real, just as God is real and his relationships are real. But if we are to come into the presence of a perfect God, how can we come close to him?

If, as Paul's repeated so often, we are stained by imperfection and sin. Well then, God justifies.

[13 : 20] And if you're looking for details on this step of justification, listen back to the rest of our Roman series. But the quick summary of this incredible step is that God has completely and totally dealt with our sin in Jesus' death on the cross.

We are no longer considered sinful in God's eyes and by faith we can receive this incredible gift. And finally then, at the end of the chain, if we come into the presence of a perfect God, what does that mean for us?

Well, it's the simplest step of all. If we are in the presence of God, we are glorified. We get to stand in the throne room of the one true God as brothers and sisters to Jesus Christ.

There is nothing more glorified than that. So, what can we do with this unbreakable chain? Well, I feel like we often picture this chain of events as sort of stretched over the timeline of our life, as if we're going through life moving from God predestining us to God calling us to God justifying us and then eventually to God glorifying us for some time in the future.

But that's not the case. Here's a fun activity. Have a really close look at these verbs in verse 29 and 30. There's a secret grammatical connection. Have you picked it up?

[14 : 45] They're all in the past tense. They've all already happened. So, it's more accurate to view the chain like this, happening before we even came into being.

There's nothing more to be done. God has already foreknew, predestined, called, and justified us. Ah, but then you might ask, what about glorification? Are we already standing in the throne room of God?

Well, as nice as this building is, no. We're not currently standing in the presence of God the Father, at least not yet. So then why does Paul use the past tense when talking about glorification?

Well, I think the rest of this passage shows that he is so sure that this plan will come to pass that it is as if it has already happened. He's so confident of God's unbreakable chain finishing that he depicts it as if it is already over and done.

But okay then. So we're sitting between the justification that has happened and the glorification that is sure to happen. What do we do in the meantime?

[15 : 56] Just sit and wait? Well, no. Remember that God is working everything for good. So there must be a purpose and intent for all your days here.

And the answer is in verse 29. We're being moulded to be like Christ. All right. Halfway through the sermon, it's time to talk around, turn around and have a chat again.

We've already talked about where you think you'll be in five years. I have a chat with the person next to you. What's been the biggest change in your life in the last five years? You've got, we'll say, two minutes this time and then we'll come back together.

So have a chat. All right. Let's come back together. If you're keen to keep chatting, please continue those conversations.

Afternoon tea, morning tea. I think for me, if you're wondering, the biggest change in the last few years has been a relational one. I got married just over a year ago to the lovely Emma and now we live together, as I mentioned, with a little puppy in Mars Field.

[17:03] But yeah, I reckon it's interesting because my answer and I'm guessing your answer shows something about how we view the narrative of our own lives, where we've been and where we're going.

And interestingly, the passage we've just read has something to say about the exact same topics. Verse 29 says that God has predestined us to be conformed to the image of his son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters.

And now here, finally, is the good that God uses every one of our moments for. God uses every instant to make us more like Jesus.

Conforming to the image of something means to take on its character, its properties, its form. I like to think of it like an iron mould, where you pour molten iron into a mould and as the iron cools, it takes on the shape and form of the mould.

In the same way, Paul says that God is making us take the shape of Jesus. Not physically, I'm not going to say we're all going to look like a man from the ancient Middle East, but instead taking on his character, his morals, his attitudes, his worldviews.

[18:11] And if you've read the Gospel, you know Jesus' traits. Kindness, forgiveness, mercy, justice. As we go through life, Paul is saying that God is making us more and more like Jesus.

So where does that leave us? If this is all God's doing, what are we meant to do? How are we meant to respond to this? I think this creates a fundamental shift in how Christians view the past and the future.

Come on. There we go. When was the last time you sat down and thought about your past? When was the last time you stopped and tried to look at how God has been working in your life?

It's not always obvious in the moment, but with the benefit of hindsight, sometimes it can be blazingly clear about how God has used massive change in your life to make you more like Jesus. Other times it can be hard to see how hardship has grown you or how a period of difference or indifference from God can be worked for good.

But being able to pinpoint how God has been working in your life is an enormous encouragement, whether it's realizing that hardship grows faith or that distance helps make clear the depth of your need for God.

[19:33] So have you taken a moment on the bus to work or school or when you just put the kid down for a nap or in the shower in the morning or the evening? Have you thought about what's been going on in your life and seen how it has changed you and thought about how God might be working in your life to make it more like Jesus?

And then there's the flip side of this. What are you aiming towards? What does progress look like in your life? Who are you trying to be? Where are you trying to get to? What life are you trying to achieve?

Where do you want to be in five years? The Bible says that God is using time to make you more like Jesus. So set a goal for your future.

It's only a year's time. On the 10th of June, 2023, I want to be able to look back and say, God has made me more patient than I was a year ago. Or God has made me kinder than I was a year ago.

Or more generous. Or God has made me better at loving those I find hard to love. Set a goal such that in a year, you'll be able to look back and say, I think I'm more like Jesus than I was a year ago.

[20 : 41] Yeah, with all these changes in growth, how can Paul be so sure that God's plan will actually happen? With all these promises of change, is there any evidence that this glorification or progress will actually happen?

Well, now we come to the top of the tower, the pinnacle of Romans 8, and really the climax of the first half of Romans. And here at the top of the tower, we actually see there's a telescope, and this telescope is showing us an incredible vision of God's holy, glorious power, and we will come away from this vision certain that nothing and no one can stop God's plan.

Now, quick warning, we're about to get to another curly font verse. Romans 8, 38 to 39 is a beautiful piece of writing. An enormous encouragement to Christians around the world that I'm sure has been many people's iPhone wallpaper.

If you haven't read this verse before, then oh boy, you're in for a treat. But you, once again, you are missing out on the full significance and weight of the passage if you don't read the bits before it.

It's such a good verse, you've got to build up to it. So let's quickly go through Paul's logic for why he's convinced that God's good plan for glorification will come to pass.

[21 : 54] Think of it as the nails on which Paul is going to hang an incredible painting. So Paul's foundation for this belief are five unchallengeable questions. Five questions for which there is only one answer.

The first one is in verse 31. If God is for us, who can be against us? Now, if the question was who is against us, there might be many answers. The world, the devil, ourselves even.

But for the question, if the one true God, the master of all creation and Lord of space and time is for us, then who can be against us? Well, then the answer is obviously no one.

I've been really struck by the English theologian John Stott's comment that perhaps the most terrible words which human ears will ever hear are those which God uttered many times in the Old Testament.

I am against you. How good then is the news of the gospel that God is now on the side of those he has chosen? The next unchallengeable question is in verse 32.

[23 : 06] He who did not spare his own son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things? Again, if Paul had asked, will God give us all things?

Look, we might have ummed and ah'd and said like, kinda, in a big picture sort of way. Like, we have a lot of needs and there's 8 billion people out there, so like, like, maybe?

But the way Paul expresses this question vanishes any doubt. This is the God who has already given us his most precious possession, his own indescribable son.

In comparison to Jesus, all other gifts are simple to give. So once again, there is only one answer. Of course he will. Now with the next two questions, Paul suddenly brings us into a courtroom.

Have a look at verse 33 and 34 on the screen. Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies. Who then is the one who condemns? No one.

[24 : 09] Many might accuse us of misdeeds, but if God the judge has declared us innocent, then there is no charge that can be brought against us. Many might try and condemn us. But if Jesus has died and been raised to life, then he has taken all our condemnation and judgment on himself so that no one can condemn us.

And with these unchallengeable nails in place, Paul asks one final unchallengeable question. But this isn't a nail. This is the climax and the conclusion. This is the painting, the glorious vision that Paul has been building up to.

Paul asks, who then shall separate us from the love of Christ? And his answer is astounding. He starts off by suggesting possible answers.

Trouble, hardship, persecution. Yet the previous questions have shown us that no one can condemn us. No one can bring any charge against us. There is nothing God will withhold from us and there is no one who can stand against his will.

So then truly, what can separate us from the love of God? And Paul's answer isn't just nothing. His answer is nothing.

[25 : 21] Paul here is trying to expand your understanding of just how certain God's plan is. Imagine your sense of God's power and control as a little balloon. Paul is trying to inflate that balloon to push you to think bigger than you've ever thought before and to better grasp what it means for God to have infinite power and ultimate sovereignty.

Do you think that running to the ends of the earth will hide you from God? Do you think that if you were at the bottom of the ocean, God wouldn't know you better than you know yourself? Do you think that if you grew old, the God who knew you before you were born could forget about you?

Do you think that if the government outlawed the Christian God, made church illegal and you could be jailed for talking about Jesus at work, do you think his power would be any less? Do you think that when you are lying in a casket, God will be any less able to show his love for you?

And most of all, do you think that anything you can do can stop God's love? If he has the power to raise a man from the dead and to grant eternal life, what power do we little people have to stop such incredible love?

Whatever conscious or unconscious boundary you put on God's power, get rid of it. God is bigger and more infinite than you can imagine. And what do we come away with?

[26 : 44] We come away with a certainty. A certainty that God's plan cannot be stopped. Nothing will separate us from God, nothing can stop God's plan from coming to fruition.

Not even you. And you may have noticed, certainty has been becoming a bit of a scarce thing recently. Do you feel like you've had plans, say, in the last, I don't know, two years that have been interrupted?

Holiday plans, party plans, even wedding plans. Frankly, I think Australian society is still grappling with the two years of time we've lost.

And I think it'll be a while before we really understand how so many months of lockdown has permanently changed Australian culture. Here's another question for you. Do you remember that week in March 2020 when we heard that lockdown was starting and we'd have to start wearing masks everywhere?

If we had time, I would love to hear your stories about that week. The thing I remember is just how sudden it all felt. One week was a normal work week and the next, suddenly we were in challenging times.

[27 : 52] I think COVID and lockdowns attacked one of the fundamental beliefs of our society, certainty. It reminded us just how quickly our plans and lives can get disrupted and taken away any confidence that would happen tomorrow.

I'm not sure about you, but I've been really uncertain about the future over the last two years. I didn't know when lockdowns would end, when they would start up again, if the plans I had to see my friends and family would happen, if my wedding would be able to go ahead.

Why else did New South Wales watch the daily COVID press conferences with such dedication except to try and establish some semblance of control over the future? And as COVID has slowly stopped being part of our daily worries and concerns, I think we're all still pretty shaken from the experience.

We know now that any certainty in jobs, relationships, schedules, or lifestyles is all built on shaky ground. Well, in this uncertain age, there is only one real certainty to build your life on.

God's good plan for glorification is so guaranteed that Paul talks about it like it's already happened. It is the rock you can build your worldview, your family, your career, your identity on.

[29 : 05] God is using each and every moment of your life to make you more like Christ. This is an unstoppable plan. So trust that it will happen. Live with this knowledge in your head.

And as you go out into the world this week, this is my challenge to you personally. Every time you hear a piece of troubling news, any time you hear a story that threatens to overturn your life, remember the unique realness of God's plan.

Whenever you're feeling shaky, feeling uncertain about the way your life or the world is going, remind yourself of God's unstoppable design for your life. Put your trust in His power and the certainty that can only be found in Him.