

SAFE AND SECURE

I LOVE YOUR WAYS

Romans 8:28

The Apostle Paul writes: **“And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.”**

Many years ago, on my first Thanksgiving in ministry, I was called to the hospital to help a young couple. She had just given birth and the baby did not survive. They were very young and had only been married a couple of years. They were unchurched and didn't have a relationship with Jesus. I stood as a young pastor with this couple at Coral Springs Hospital. I really had absolutely no answers for them in that moment. I tried to pray for them. I tried to help them. I tried to love them. I tried to encourage them. They were certainly not equipped for this moment and I was feeling very ill-equipped myself.

In the many years that have passed in ministry, I find that God places me in the lives of people in their happiest moments and also in their saddest moments, in their greatest moments and in their most tragic moments. It's an unspeakable privilege and honor, especially with you, especially the church, like this one.

We have been talking about living life securely in Jesus Christ – Safe and Secure. **How do we live secure in an unsafe world? The promises of Romans 8 are that in Jesus Christ there is complete security, and that the massive root that supports all insecurity – condemnation – is cut off in Jesus Christ. Every damning thing is removed because of the work and person of Jesus Christ. If that's going to be convincing, if that's going to be comprehensive, we have to deal with the bad things in life, the bad things that happen to us.**

If I'm going to experience true security, then I've got to survive these moments. The Apostle Paul's answer to that challenge is that in Jesus Christ you will not merely survive, but that God will actually use those things for good in your life. That is an *amazing* promise, right? That is a spectacular, radical claim that Paul brings to us. Let's be honest. The emphasis here is not on the good things. It's on the bad things.

For me to say to you, “Well, don't worry; the good things are going to work out good for your life” is like, “Well, yeah,” right? I went to the doctor last week and had an annual physical. He told me I was

in perfect health. Oh wow – how will I deal with that? Right? I met the love of my life. I proposed. She said yes. We are going to be happy forever. I’m pretty sure I can handle those moments of God using everything for good, but what about the disappointments, the heartache, the real tragedy in life? God uses everything for good in the lives of those who know Jesus Christ.

So, you hear there a condition. **There is a condition. He says this is true for everyone who loves God and is called according to his purpose.** Please understand that Paul is not at all insinuating that you earn God’s goodness. He is not saying that if you love God and you earn something from God that then he will make sure everything works out for good. He is describing a Christian. But he is doing it in very specific language. He is choosing his language carefully. Why?

Paul does this in a number of places throughout scripture. In just a phrase, in just a verse, he will give a description of a Christian. He will say that a Christian is a new creation in 2 Corinthians 5. He will say in Galatians 2 that a Christian is someone who has been crucified with Jesus and no longer lives for himself but lives by faith in Jesus. He will say in Ephesians 2 that a Christian is someone that has been saved completely by grace. In Philippians 3 a Christian is someone who puts no confidence in themselves, but all of their confidence in the Spirit of God. Later in that chapter a Christian is a citizen of heaven. On and on, all throughout scripture and particularly in Paul, he will give these little summations of what it means to be a Christian.

Each time he does that, he could say the same thing over and over. He could give us some bumper sticker theology like, “Christians aren’t perfect, just forgiven.” I got a chuckle there. He is choosing his description very carefully because his emphasis supports the truth he is trying to teach us. Here is what he emphasizes. **The Christian is someone who has been called by God. God has awakened you. It’s not what you have done; it’s what God has done to you. God has brought you new life. God has made you new. God has called you. He has called you by name. He has called you in this personal way. He has called you to his glorious purpose -- to his purposes in history, to his purposes in the universe, to his purposes in the world and in your life.**

The connection that we begin to see is that security is attached to meaning. It’s attached to significance. It’s attached to life purpose. The person without meaning is an insecure one. **The person without a sense of life purpose is an insecure one.**

Paul tells us that a Christian has been called by God, called into the purposes of God, has been filled with unmeasurable, unspeakable significance, meaning, and purpose, and that everything works

toward the accomplishment of that, toward the fulfillment of God's purpose in your life. Hence our title: "I Love Your Ways."

I want to spend a moment here making sure that we've captured this basic truth. We have three messages, this one and two more left in Romans 8. These three messages are an attack on fear.

Christ defeats fear in your life. In this message he does that by calling us to live by faith, by calling us to staggering confidence in God. Everything in my life is working toward God's good purpose. Everything has a place. When it's all said and done, there will be no leftover parts.

You know how it is when you assemble things? You put the bookshelf together, then you look and you are like: "Wow, I wonder what that was for?" There are no leftover parts when God finishes your life. Everything is working together for good. So he attacks fear in this verse with this sense of amazing confidence that everything, everything, everything has a place in God's purpose in my life as it works out.

The next message has an intensely doctrinal approach. We will talk about salvation and how we are saved by the work of God from the beginning to the end. Sometimes people will say, "Ah, I don't want to get all caught up in discussions about this part of theology. It's just controversial." But we'll see how Paul makes an application. He says that understanding that God saves us from beginning to end and that our security is in his saving work actually produces a fruit of living securely in him. There is a practical application.

Then the final message is a logical one. It's similar to what Jesus does in Matthew chapter 6 when he attacks anxiety and fear and worry and tells us that it's just illogical. Paul's point here is (think about this): If God the Father has given his Son for you as a sacrifice for you and for your sin, is there any good thing that he will withhold from you? No! Nothing can separate you from the love of God. It just doesn't make sense that God would go to this great length to demonstrate his love to adopt you, to bring you into his family, and then withhold good things from you.

That's a real assault on the root of sin, where the enemy comes and says, "You know, if you follow God you'll have less of a life. So *live* before you come to Jesus." The message of scripture is: **Come to Jesus and *live* because God is good.**

I've said that there are some conditions here. Maybe you're here and you say, "You know, I'm not sure I meet those conditions. I'm not sure I am a Christian." I'm glad you're here and I want to invite you to hear this message as an invitation to trust in Jesus, as an invitation to the promises that are yours

in Christ. If you have followed Jesus and you say, “Yes, this characterizes my life,” then the response that we are looking for in this message is: Faith. Put your confidence in God, specifically in the area where you are tempted to fear bad things.

So, let’s talk a little bit. Let’s try to unpack how this looks in life. How do I learn to delight in God’s ways? Here are some examples of how God uses everything for good in our lives. The first is new life.

I. New Life.

This is often the way that we start with God. Often God uses difficulty to humble us. Martin Lloyd-Jones, in reference to this specific verse said, “God uses trial and difficulty to humble us, to awaken us, to alert us.” He is saying that sometimes we are just going along in life when something happens that is jarring for us. It turns us to say, “Wow, I need something; I need someone outside of myself. I was made for something more than this. The path I was on was not what I thought it was. Eternity is coming for me and I’m not ready for it.” It alerts us. It awakens us. It calls us to God. Many here would say, “I have a relationship with God. It’s God’s mercy. It’s God’s grace. I’m so grateful. And it came in a moment of tragedy in my life, in a moment of difficulty.” So one of the ways, I think, for those who have experienced it, it’s not unusual, is new life. A second way is similar. It’s personal growth.

II. Personal Growth.

God uses difficulty in our lives to strength us, right? This is obvious. Even Kelly Clarkson knows this. “What doesn’t kill you makes you stronger.” Right? I like to say, “What doesn’t kill you makes you meaner,” but we all understand the principle that if we persevere in difficulty, there is gain that awaits us. Certainly, this is a biblical truth: God uses trials to test our faith, to reveal our hearts, to show us where we are, to help us move further. I think these first two are a little more obvious. The third one that I want to share is a life story.

III. Life Story.

God works in our lives, taking everything in our lives and using it for his purpose so that our lives tell a story of God's grace. This is what I would call a little less obvious, but I think it's one of the ways to look at this passage and really benefit from it. Look at the Apostle Paul. There he is, persecuting Christians. The persecutor of Christians becomes persecuted. The man who was putting people in prison is imprisoned later for the same thing that he was putting people in prison for, and he writes much of the New Testament while he is there in prison. Wow, talk about sowing and reaping, right?

When he gets saved, something interesting happens. He is going to Damascus to persecute Christians, and Jesus appears to him, knocks him down, strikes him blind, and speaks to him. Then he gets to where he is going and there is a man named Ananias. The Lord speaks to Ananias and says, "Ananias, I want you to go pray for this guy named Saul, who will become Paul." Ananias says, "Lord, maybe you're not aware...but no. He kills Christians! He puts us in prison!"

It really is hysterical. It's like: "He tricks people," as if God could be fooled, right? This is what the Lord speaks to Ananias: "He is my chosen instrument. He is going to proclaim my gospel, my grace to the Gentiles, to kings, to my people." And then this phrase: "I will show him how much he will suffer for me." How would you like that to be the way God calls you? We say, "Boy, I wish God would talk to me the way he talked to Paul." No thanks. Right?

So, you look at his life and there is this theme, even before he confessed Christ, of suffering for the name and the cause of Christ, so that it becomes his story. There is a general way that we are all called to the same purpose. We are all called to share the love of Christ. We are all called to live a life that glorifies him. Titus 2 gives it this way. We are called to grow in character (Christ-like character). We are called in relationship with Jesus, to know him. And we are called to a life of good works, proclaiming the love of Christ and demonstrating it in practical works.

Really, in a general sense we all have this general calling to grow in character, to grow in relationship with Jesus, and to be zealous for doing good – proclaiming the love of Christ, the message, and demonstrating it in practical ways. But God is telling that story in a unique way in your life.

My wife and I were talking about this. Part of the great thing about being empty nesters is that now on Saturday I get to preach the message to my wife over dinner. We were just talking about the themes of God's grace in our relationship with one another, with our children, in ministry, and in life.

So that's a way. I'll come back to that because I want to illustrate it a little further. Let me give you a fourth way that we learn to delight in God's ways, and that is:

IV. Avenues of Grace.

This is kind of a combination of all of the above. Do you remember that the Apostle Paul had an affliction? He called it a thorn in the flesh. He prayed three times for God to take it away and God said no. We read these verses as he explains. 2 Corinthians 12, verses 9-10:

But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

Those are remarkable claims. **Paul is saying that the difficulties, the "bad things" are avenues where God brings his favor, his mercy, his power, his grace into my life. It's just the way God works. And as God does that, part of what I experience is an enlarged faith in Jesus as I learn to depend on him in every situation.**

If we put all these together I think it helps us to begin to see: **"Okay, Lord, you want me to live with this robust confidence in you, that you are directing my life. Everything past, present, and future is directed by you, for your purpose."** I want to illustrate this with the life of John Newton.

I had the privilege last month to be in London, and I actually stood in the pulpit of John Newton. I wanted to pray that his anointing would fall on me, but as of yet I don't think it's happened. John Newton is a historical hero of mine, partially because of the brokenness of his life and the way he experienced God's grace. You may know him. He is probably most famous for writing the hymn "Amazing Grace."

"Amazing Grace" is the most sung hymn of all time. It has been recorded just in the U.S. over 3000 times. It is sung over 10,000,000 times every year publicly. What's interesting about the song is that it's really Newton's life story. It's full of personal pronouns. "Amazing Grace! How sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me!" He is telling you his story. It actually comes from a biblical reference.

He was preaching on New Year's Day 1773 from this passage: 1 Chronicles 17:16-17. This is David, reflecting on his life. God has just told David that there is going to be someone on his throne forever -- that his house is going to last forever. And this is what David says in response.

Then King David went in and sat before the LORD and said, "Who am I, O LORD God, and what is my house, that you have brought me thus far? And this was a small thing in your eyes, O God. You have also spoken of your servant's house for a great while to come, and have shown me future generations, O LORD God!"

He is just overcome with God's goodness to him. Well Newton, on December 31, is reflecting on this. This is the day before computers and iPads and even journals, like we have. He has this portfolio – a *big* book – and for 20 years he has been journaling in this book. He comes to the last page -- time to buy a new journal. It was pricey. It was expensive. It was done in a completely different way than we would think. Here he is, New Year's Eve, and he is reflecting on 20-25 years of life. He comes to this passage to preach on New Year's Day and finds himself before the Lord saying, "Who am I that I would receive your grace?"

His story is a remarkable portrayal of God's grace. He worked in the slave trade. He worked on ships, capturing slaves from West Africa. On one voyage when he was a young man, he got very ill and they left him in West Africa. After a period of time, he was enslaved and should have died there in West Africa. He was rescued by a ship and brought back, and then he continued to work in the trading of slaves from Africa.

It's emotional for me. I've been to the fort there. It's not far from where my two sons lived. We adopted them from Ghana – the Gold Coast, or the Slave Coast, it's called. I've been to the fort and I've seen the point of no return. It's just *staggering* wickedness and evil.

So here is Newton, involved in this activity. On one occasion he is coming back to Great Britain. He was asleep and was awakened in the night and told that the ship is sinking and that it's all hands on deck. So he rushes up to the deck. Right as he is about to ascend onto the deck, someone grabs him to tell him to go below to work the pumps. As they grab him, another guy steps one foot in front of him. That guy is swept off the deck and dies. There is this "that should have been me" moment for Newton. He goes in, starts pumping water, and prays to God.

He has what is probably a salvation experience. People don't like to call it that because he continues to work in the slave trade. It's unthinkable, right? He becomes a captain of a slave ship and he

actually tries to do everything that he can (I know this totally doesn't make sense) to be a good captain so that none of his slaves dies. Huge percentages would die. It was wicked.

Eventually he gets out of the slave trade and becomes a pastor, but no one would have him. It takes him years to become an Anglican pastor. He plays a critical role as life progresses and his eyes are opened to see the evil of this trading of slaves and the enslavement of others. In fact, it's a famous story that William Wilberforce, who was the key person in defeating slavery in Great Britain, came to him as a young man. Now he's a pastor. He's getting older. He is seasoned in ministry. He is starting to speak about the wickedness of the slave trade. He wanted to be away from it for years. He starts to speak about it and Wilberforce pays him a visit.

Now, there was a shame attached to coming to see Newton, because he was an evangelical preacher. No member of Parliament would go to see this crazy gospel preacher. So he writes Newton a note and says, "Don't tell anyone. I don't want anyone to know." He comes in and sees Newton, and Newton famously says that Wilberforce has been moved on by the Spirit of God. Wilberforce says, "I think I should quit and go into the ministry." Newton tells him, "No, no, no. Don't be ridiculous. Don't do that. God has placed you. You have a calling on your life. Serve God where you are." Then he goes, and as a very young man he dedicates his life to the defeat of slavery. It takes Wilberforce almost 50 years. On his deathbed, three days before he dies, the bill finally passes for slavery to end in Great Britain. Three days later, on his death day, they sign it into law. Newton plays a role in that.

Now, part of what's remarkable in his life is that "Amazing Grace" as we now sing it, was not really how he wrote it. It didn't have the last verse. It wasn't to the tune that we sing it. Newton was a bit of a radical. They weren't even allowed to sing popular songs in the Anglican Church. If you are new to Church, I just have to apologize. We have been fighting over some of the same things for hundreds of years. We just can't seem to get this right. There is controversy where there shouldn't be. But Newton said, "Forget the rules," and he started writing hymns to support his messages. I may try that. I may sing some solos for you. He wrote "Amazing Grace" on that day, from that passage, and they sang it on New Year's Day 1773, to a different tune. He didn't write the music.

In its current form, with its last verse – do you know how we got it? How it became popularized? It was sung in the Deep South, in America, not in Great Britain, by slaves. Not exclusively, but there is widespread agreement that the power of the song as we now experience it was brought to us through that impossible journey.

Now, I think when you hear that story, it's personal. You say, "I love your ways. How could you take the wickedness of a man and turn it into a story of grace?" This is how God works in our lives, so that we learn to trust him to say, "You are planning what we can't imagine!"

I want to help us as we exit this message. You may be saying, "Brian, that's all good and well, but I'm afraid of bad things. I don't have the strength to do this. What if this happened? And what if that happened? I just couldn't do it!" I think of the story that Corrie ten Boom told. She and her family hid Jewish people in Nazi-occupied Europe. They were Dutch. They actually had an architect come and they built out a hidden room where they hid them. Eventually, in 1944 they were arrested and she and her sister were put in the concentration camps. As a little girl, she had told her dad, "I'm afraid that I don't have the strength if God calls on me to suffer for his name." Very wisely, her father said, "Well, Corrie, when you take the train from Amsterdam to Paris, when do I give you the money for the train? Do I give it to you weeks in advance?" She said, "No. No, Daddy, you give it to me right before I get on the train." He said, "Well, that's the way God's grace works. He gives it to us right before we get on the train."

All I can tell you is that God wants us to trust him with tomorrow. It's a powerful lesson taught throughout scripture. Jesus tells us in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 6: "But seek ye first the kingdom of God and his righteousness and all these things will be added unto you." He is telling us, "Don't worry about all these practical things." But then look at what he says. He says, "Therefore, do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself." If we could live that sentence, right?

I was talking with someone this week who was telling me about her devotions with her children. I won't mention any names. She was telling her husband and me how she taught her kids about the manna. She said, "Look, God provided the manna one day at a time." She said, "Don't take more than what you need for this day. Those who couldn't trust God for tomorrow woke up to spoiled, maggot-infested manna." God is committed to you trusting him for tomorrow. He wants you to live by faith.

Final thought. When my daughter was a little girl, she was a star, best in America, soccer player. And there was this game where she had scored two goals. I now look back in such shame at this moment. But in this crazy, competitive attitude, I'm yelling at the field: "Score one more goal! Get a hat trick!" (That's what happens when you have three goals, if you're not a sports fan.) "And I'll take

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you to Chipotle!" My wife tells me that this is my contribution to the family - this obsessive, competitive, unhealthy attitude. I'm glad I contributed something.

Now, in the providence of God, Adam's wife is here. She was on that team and probably hated us when she saw us standing there acting this way. So, because my daughter is just amazing, she scored a third goal. Right? I was a proud dad. There was this long meeting after the game. I had a place to be and I had promised my daughter that we were going to Chipotle. I got in the car and said, "Sweetheart, I am so sorry, but I cannot deliver on this promise. I have to be at this other place. Can I do this another time? I didn't anticipate how long this would take." Can I tell you that God never has to say to his children: "I'm sorry. I just didn't anticipate this. I didn't plan on this." **God's will is always accomplished. Nothing will stop the will of God in your life. Trust him for tomorrow.**

Let's pray.