

# Discovering hope in dark times

Romans 8:31-39

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I recently read that the African Impala can jump 3 meters high and 9 meters long. But it can be kept in a zoo inside a 1-meter wall and no fences. Why does it not jump the wall and escape? It is believed that the impala won't jump where it cannot exactly see. I am not sure if that is true, but it sure does make for an interesting lesson. We are like those Impalas. If we need to have things our way, if we need to see exactly what comes next, it will become a prison for us. If we trust God that he will catch us when we jump, then we can have hope even if we can't see what is coming ahead of us. Today, I am going to share a passage from the Bible that gives us hope to jump. Please take time to read and think about this as it might be of great use to you during this time. The passage is Romans 8:31-39. Paul begins in verse 31 with a question: ***"What then shall we say to these things?"*** Paul is referring to the "things" in verses 28-30, where he summarizes the salvation that God has given us.

***<sup>28</sup> And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose. <sup>29</sup> 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. <sup>30</sup> And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified."***

What does it mean that ***"for those who love God, all things work together for good"***? What is our good? If you ask a hundred people, they will give very different answers. Verse 28 gives us a clue when it explains that this working together happens ***"for those who are called according to his purpose."*** There is an unbreakable link between the purpose and what we call good. If I have a job that charges me to demolish old buildings, then it is good to destroy certain old buildings. If we are honest, understanding our purpose correctly is a problem for many of us. We think our purpose is to enjoy ourselves on earth, and therefore our "good" looks like wealth and ease. Others think that success in a career is their purpose, and so they call anything that stands in their way "bad", even at times their own family.

When we find God's purpose for our lives, we will find his definition of good. Verse 29 explains that for God, our "purpose" is **"to be conformed to the image of his Son"**. God has planned to make us look like Jesus. This has nothing to do with the physical look of Jesus. It has to do with looking like Jesus spiritually, growing in the character of Jesus here now (Phil. 2:1-10). It has to do with following the example of Jesus as God's agent on earth (1 Cor. 11:1) and deepening our relationship with God (John 14:15-31). It also has to do with the plan God has to resurrect believers and give them the same kind of sinless indestructible resurrection body that Jesus has now because of his resurrection (Phil. 3:20-21). God has plans for us and things for us to do until the day he calls us home (Eph. 2:10). God has a plan to make you into the best version of you, the one that looks the most like Jesus.

Verse 30 explains the process from God's perspective: **"And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified."** Theologians call verse 30 the golden chain of redemption, because of the chainlike connection between the four words: predestined, called, justified, and glorified. It is a process of salvation that is impossible to break, like links in a chain. Each link is a step. First, God chooses to bring us into his family. This is predestination. Don't be concerned today to understand how this and your will work together. God says he chose you, and you must also choose him. Both are true, but this passage describes God's view of salvation. Second, he calls us to himself, and eventually, you understand, believe, and are impacted by the gospel. Your faith then brings justification, which means that God not only forgives you but takes the righteousness of the spotless lamb, Jesus, and gives it to you. He agrees to see you like Jesus. He covers you with Jesus' innocence and righteousness as with a blanket or a cloak. That is justification. Lastly, he takes you on a process step by step, making you look more like Jesus. We begin to move one step at a time until the day we will be resurrected and sinless. This changing from glory to glory until resurrection is called glorification. This is the unbreakable chain of redemption. It is certain to happen. God, who began the good work in your life, will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ (Phil. 1:6). We can summarize it like this: God has an unshakable purpose and plan from start to finish to make us like Jesus. That causes us to return to our passage for today, where we find four conclusions that come from this thought:

1. No one can prevail against God's good purpose in our lives (v. 31).
2. God will provide all the resources we need to accomplish His purposes (v. 32).
3. God's opinion of us cannot be changed (v. 33-34).
4. No matter the difficult circumstance or person that we deal with, we know that God loves us (v. 35-39).

## **1. No one can prevail against God's good purpose in our lives**

***<sup>131</sup> What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us?"***

Abraham did not know God. He was a worshiper of idols (Joshua 24:2), but God called him and promised to be for him. He risked his life to follow God to a country he did not know, because God was for him. Jacob's brother wanted to kill him; his uncle tried to trick him and steal his sheep and his years of service, but God made his wealth greater than his uncle's. Jacob even blessed the Pharaoh in the name of his God, because God was for him. Joseph's brothers sold him into slavery. He learned what it was to depend on God in the pain of the well and the darkness of slavery,

because God was for him. Joseph was falsely accused, but he learned to honor God above anything else, because God was for him. He was thrown in prison and surely suffered many things, but it was in the prison that he met his connection to the Pharaoh. The worst they could do to him was bring him closer to God, because God was for him. Joseph became the prime minister of the greatest nation on earth at his time, because God was for him. Moses was abandoned as a baby to the river, but God had the daughter of Pharaoh pick him up, and he was adopted and educated in the best education of his time, because God was for him. The Egyptians who had forced the Israelites into slavery now were giving their gold and silver and begging them to leave, because God was for them. When Pharaoh tried to attack them at the Red Sea, thinking he would destroy them, God turned his attack into one of the greatest rescues of all time. What was meant to steal their faith became the very thing that would cause them to believe, because God was for them. David was trained and then persecuted by Saul. Under that pressure he wrote the beautiful Psalms we know. Not only that, Saul's harsh treatment of David made David a better King. As Saul desired to destroy David, God was using Saul to make David a better servant, because God was for David.

What about you? God has a day for you to die or maybe he will return and take us all, but until that day, he has a purpose for us. Nothing and no one can stop it from happening. The coronavirus may take some of our life, but it is only to take us to the arms of Jesus, because God is for us. Covid-19 may take our jobs, only to see us find another one or to see God miraculously provide for us, because God is for us. The coronavirus may cause your boss to shout at you, your spouse to hate you, your children to rebel against you, your employees lie to you, your best friends to betray you, but none of this cannot prevail against you. It will all serve to make you more like Jesus, because God is for us. The difficult people in your life give you a chance to grow spiritually in Christ. Through your trials, you learn who God is. You see him work. You can pray and watch God transform you and others. You are a child of God. If you are passing through a hard time, it is only for one reason. It is to make us more like Jesus. If God is for us, who can be against us? No one can succeed. He will turn it for our good.

## **2. God will provide all the resources we need to accomplish His purposes**

***“<sup>132</sup> He who did not spare his own Son but gave up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?”***

This is called a greater to lesser logic. If God gave us the greater gift, Jesus' death and resurrection on our behalf, why would he hold back the smaller, lesser things we need? One time when we were living on the Amazon river, we woke up on a Saturday and both my wife and I felt we needed to take food to some Colombian missionaries. The interesting thing is that we had not discussed it. It was in our separate prayer times that we both just knew that we needed to give them food. We were acquaintances with these missionaries, not close friends. We went to the store and bought groceries. We drove to the jungle camp where they lived. When we arrived and brought the groceries toward their house, they began to cry. One of these young adult ladies began to weep, saying thank you God, thank you God. The others were amazed. They had not eaten for two days. They had run out of money and food. They said, “God must want us to fast and pray for the work here, that is why we do not have money or food.” They had not called or told anyone. They just prayed.

What about you? Do you doubt that God can provide for you? Now is the time to pray. Now is the time to see God act. Believe, and you will see the provision of God. God is trying to make you like Jesus and he will give you whatever you need to be like him.

### 3. God's opinion of us cannot be changed

*<sup>33</sup> Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. <sup>34</sup> Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died—more than that, who was raised—who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us.”*

Many of us come from countries where they fear evil spirits. People fear that God will punish them for their sins. In the Bible, people feared that Satan would stir up God against them, but God has justified us. He has changed the game. He does not punish Christians; he disciplines them. He uses pain and problems to change us. He may discipline us, in love, bringing all kinds of things into our lives, because he wants us to look more like Jesus. But in all these things, our sins cannot cancel our spiritual adoption into his family. We are God's kids. It is God who justifies. We may lose that sense of closeness with God, but we will never lose our status before him. We cannot be condemned on the day of judgment.

But there is more to learn here. Why do we care so much what others think of us? There are many reasons. We live in a world where when marriage gets difficult, people abandon each other. When the spouse gets unattractive, loses their job or gets sick, it is common to hear of people leaving their spouses. People reject other people for any and every reason. The world is cruel. It is easy to believe that people are more faithful to their favorite sports teams, TV shows, and restaurant chains than we are to our own friends and family. Rejection is common. Therefore, many people fear to let people into their lives. They fear that once other people know them, they will be rejected.

Still, others look for ways to be honored, loved and appreciated. They look for projects to be involved in. They hunt for popular charities to give to. They search out causes to support that make them feel good about themselves. If I support the ..... movement, then I will be accepted, loved and respected. If I eat vegan food, use essential oils, and exercise in certain ways, then others will think I am a good person. If I defend animal' rights, fight global warming or cheer for Real Madrid, then people will think I am cool. That is why we need likes on social media. We need the approval of others.

Some of these things might be good or at least not wrong in and of themselves, but when these things become ways to get our sense of self-esteem or ways get others to cheer for our goodness, they will create prison for us. Then we will begin to hide who we really are. We might try and cover our feelings of inadequacy. When we do this we let the ever-changing opinions of the world control us by whatever they think of us. What if they disagree with you? What if they don't like how you look/act/talk/believe on social media? What if they are not impressed by our achievements or your good works? How should we react?

We should know that there is an opinion that never changes about us. What charge can they bring against you if God declares you righteous? Who can condemn you for your faith if God approves of it? Who can call you a bad person for your convictions? Who can control you through their opinions?

God's opinion is all that matters. Stop finding your value in the opinion of others who love you one day and ignore you the next. You are his child and he loves you. Nothing can change that fact.

#### 4. No matter the difficult circumstance or person that we deal with, we know that God loves us

*<sup>35</sup> Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? <sup>36</sup> As it is written, "For your sake we are being killed all the day long; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered." <sup>37</sup> No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. <sup>38</sup> For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, <sup>39</sup> nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."*

The opening question of verse 35, "*Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?*" is often misunderstood. My experience has been that sometimes in church, we read and say certain parts of the Bible so much that we really don't understand them. This is a good example. In our day, no person asks their friend, "Who or what can separate you from the love of your spouse?" We do not talk exactly like that. We would say, "What person or circumstance could ever cause your spouse to stop loving you?" That is the question the Apostle is asking. He is saying, "What person or circumstance could ever cause God to stop loving you?" How would you know that he stopped loving you? What would be the sign? If God made us Christians, his children to go through **tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword**, or the coronavirus, or the death of a friend or family member, would that mean he does not love us? The world wants a God who is here to support our agenda. They believe that God is there to serve their purposes of health, wealth, and happiness here and now. People mistakenly believe that when everything goes their way, Jesus loves them. When they go through a painful or difficult time, He must not love them or worse; He must not even exist.

But God showed his love on the cross. He gave his best. He explains to us that we are in the process of becoming like Jesus. We need to understand God's purposes and also that all these difficult things are God's instruments to accomplish his purposes in our life. When we face **tribulation**, it only purifies our faith, builds our strength, and brings us closer to God. When we are emotionally **distressed**, it only causes God to draw near to our broken hearts. When we are in a **famine**, we know that God will provide. If he chooses to leave us hungry for some good reason, we can say with Paul that we know what it is to be hungry, and we can do all things through Christ who gives us strength (Phil. 4:11-13). If we were to be so poor to the point of **nakedness**, which means the lack of cool, expensive or popular brand clothes, we would still have the clothes that count the most, because God in his great love has clothed us with the very righteousness of his Son. If we are in some **danger**, we must remember that the very hairs on our heads are counted, and even the death of a bird must be allowed by God, so why do we fear what will happen to us? If we are **persecuted**, spoken badly about, cursed, and shamed for the sake of Jesus, great is our reward in heaven. **Tribulation, distress, persecution, famine, nakedness, danger, sword**, do not mean that God has stopped loving us. *<sup>37</sup> No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us."* We conquer in and through the battle *because* he loves us.

You say, "Pastor Wyley, you don't know what I have been through." "I have been abused, and I have suffered such injustice." "I am sick and hurting." "I have lost my child or parent or spouse." Let me say that I am sorry for that and I am not making light of your suffering. What I am saying is a billion years from now in the glory of God's eternal love, you will not remember those things. Now, even though they hurt you, they also give you a chance to help others, to experience, and to share the healing power of God. They make you more like Jesus. Faith is seeing with God's eyes and trusting in him. The love of God is so great that you will conquer through this time. Whatever comes, if you are in Christ, you will conquer. The "bad" will bring glory. If you do not know God, let me say that this is not just theory. Those of us who know and walk with God are convinced that ***"neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers,<sup>39</sup> nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."***

Let me encourage you with a story as we close. In the times when European people were settling in the United States, there was a man who wished to cross the Mississippi River, a very big river, with his buggy and horse. It was the coldest part of the winter. The river was very big and there was no bridge close by. The only way to cross was to drive the wagon across the frozen river. The man reached the river and got out of the buggy. He thought he should get out and slowly walk out over the ice to check and see if he could trust it. As he was in the middle of the frozen river, he heard the sound of a man singing and a wagon coming from the other side of the river. As he looked up the man was coming in a bigger wagon with four horses pulling it. It passed by him on the ice and never slowed down as it crossed the river with no problem. God is at work in your life. In this time of stress and trouble, may He so transform you that you will go singing into difficulties you were scared of in the past. May he make us like Jesus for his glory.

### **Questions for thought and discussion:**

1. What does it mean that *for those who love God all things work together for good*?
2. What is God's purpose for every believer?
3. The Bible says, *"If God is for us who can be against us?"* What is your favorite example of this in the Bible or in real life?
4. Have you ever seen God provide for you miraculously? Can you think of a way he has answered your prayers spiritually or physically to give you what you needed?
5. Why do we care so much what some people think about us? What if we were able to let God's opinion of us be the one that matters the most?
6. What difficulty have you faced in the last few months? How might it be possible that God was using this for your good?