

## Romans 8:28-30 Reasons for our confidence in God

### Introduction

In 1966 the Hindu holy man and mystic Rao announced that he would walk on water. He was so confident in his own spiritual power that he announced he would perform the feat before a live audience. As a result tickets sold for the equivalent of a hundred US dollars apiece – a large sum of money in 1966. Bombay's elite turned out en masse to behold the spectacle. The event was held in a large garden with a deep pool. More than six hundred of Rao's faithful, along with curiosity seekers, assembled to watch in Bombay, India, where it was to occur. The holy man prayerfully prepared himself for the miracle and then stepped forward to the pool's edge. A solemn hush fell over the assembled observers. Rao glanced upward to heaven, stepped forward onto the water, and then immediately plummeted into the pool's depths. Sputtering, dripping wet, and furious, he emerged from the pool and turned angrily on the embarrassed crowd. "One of you," he said, "is an unbeliever." (Various sources on the internet). If our personal salvation or the future of this world ultimately was dependent on us then we would have considerably less confidence than Paul has here as to how the future might turn out! The reason for this is quite simple. The basis of Paul's assurance, and ours, is the sovereign and gracious will and work of God. His will must be accomplished on earth as it is in heaven. In Romans 8:28-30 the apostle in very simple terms spells out the truth of this biblical teaching.

Romans 8 and verses 28-39 in particular are an opportunity to glimpse something of the glory and majesty of God and His plans for His people on earth and beyond it. Verses 28-30 in particular are a summary of the secure grounds on which our faith is based and an explanation of why the success of the Church of Jesus Christ, numerically and spiritually is assured. It is not because we are so good or gifted, though in Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit we may accomplish far more than we ever thought possible, but because of the sovereign purposes of God who is ultimately in control. In Romans 5-8 the apostle has already explained that through our justification that is being placed in right standing before God because of Jesus, we have peace with God and therefore direct access into His presence (Romans 5:1). We are united with Christ, in Adam by nature yes, but in Christ by grace (Romans 5:12-21). The result of Jesus' *act of righteousness was justification that brings life for all men* (Romans 5:18b). We do have serious struggles with sin, but this is not a cause to doubt our salvation, rather the very opposite. Our awareness of the challenges we face and the battles we experience is confirmatory experience of the Holy Spirit working in us and through us (Romans 7:14-25); next and most important for our ongoing walk with God is the indwelling of the Holy Spirit equipping and empowering us to live for Jesus. He not only is in us and with us but also actively prays for us in our faith journey (Romans 8) in accordance with God's will. Would God make this kind of investment if He had not planned for its final success? Certainly not!

### 1. Paul's Unshakeable Convictions (Romans 8:28)

<sup>28</sup> *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.*

Paul writes here that *we know*... something; he has already made a similar assertion in verse 22 about the created order, now he makes a similar declaration of faith regarding God's providential care of the people He loves, created in His image and redeemed through the sacrifice of His beloved Son Jesus on the cross. It is important to recognise that Paul says

here *we know* not ‘we feel’. It is not a ‘whistling in the wind’ of emotional hopes in spite of what our minds may be telling us, rather his and our security is based on the solid ground of what God has done for us in Jesus. This truth enabled him in his day and countless numbers of Christians in later generations to continue serving the Lord despite all manner of difficulties or persecution. Paul himself would write in a later letter: *We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed* (II Corinthians 4:8-9). The Gospel we believe is true whatever our circumstances and God will grant us the grace we need each day of our lives, even despite the outward circumstances we may be experiencing. In Romans 8:28 many Bible commentators have noted that the apostle state five things that *we know*...

(a) **We know that God works in our lives** In the King James Version Romans 8:28 begins: *And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God...* The theory that all things work out in the end sounds good in principle but in too many scenarios of life in the real world it doesn’t look that way. An older colleague of mine in Baptist pastoral ministry can recall with unusual clarity his first day as the pastor of a local congregation. He stood with a mother whose house was on fire and whose young children were trapped inside and died in the inferno. Verbal assurances at that moment in time that *all things work together for good* would have been extremely difficult to accept in the light of such a tragedy. Elie Wiesel, the famous Jewish author, who penned his best-selling reflection on the holocaust *Night* challenged the very possibility of God at work in our lives going so far as to speak of the death of God in the light of the horrific suffering he had witnessed at the hands of the Nazis in various concentration camps. Yet what Paul actually wrote here is not how many people understood the traditional rendering of this verse. To claim somehow that everything works out in the end in this life for good we know is untrue. We wish it were the case, but sadly it is not. We need to look very carefully at the assurance given in Romans 8:28. Paul has stated first of all that God not only exists but that He is involved in our lives. Secondly he declares

(b) **We know that God works for the good of His people** *we know that ...God works for the good of those who love Him* God promises to be at work **for our good** in the situations we experience –good or bad or circumstances characterised as neither good nor bad- to bring good out of them. Individually we can face health issues, bereavements, loss of employment, relationship breakdowns and a whole lot more besides that are part of the downside of life. These things in themselves are not good. In a small proportion of these scenarios a good outcome may appear fairly quickly. For example, a number of people over the years have gone to a doctor with a relatively minor complaint that through its diagnosis and treatment a more major health issue was discovered which if left undiscovered could have been extremely serious or even led in time to death. Another example was of a Christian couple –if still alive- who have been happily married for over thirty years, yet both were previously married to extremely violent and abusive spouses and needed assistance from Christians and specialist professionals to recover from the ordeals they had endured. Years ago an article in a popular Christian monthly was the story of a Christian man who had lost a highly paid job in the financial services industry a couple of years earlier, but was now working in a very different kind of work. The individual concerned who wrote the article thanked God for his unemployment –not at the time- but had come to realise that for him the change had given him and his family a better quality of life that he had not thought possible. It is important to be clear in acknowledging that as Christians we are not spared the challenges in life other people face. What is different is that the Lord is with us **for our good** to give us the grace and strength in our trials and to help us through them in this life or to help us as we take the journey to our eternal home with Jesus.

(c) **We know that God works for our good in all things** In some respects this is a continuation of the previous point, but Paul's emphasis is important here. There are probably increasing numbers of things I do not understand as I get older as to why God allows things to happen the way they do? It is not so much a knowledge issue –though it will include knowledge- rather it is sometimes difficult to see how God is more glorified in particular outcomes rather than others; or why He permits things to develop in the way they do in certain people's lives at specific times or in particular circumstances. I believe it is okay to admit we don't know the answer to 'why' questions? We may never understand why God allowed particular negative things to overshadow our lives or equally why we received particular blessings that we in all honesty had no right to expect. What the apostle wants to assure us here is that our lives are not dependent on luck or chance. There is no circumstance that takes Him by surprise. All of us at different times and for different reasons will struggle with aspects of the *all things*. Paul faced his with his *thorn in the flesh* (II Corinthians 12:7). He pleaded with God to take the unnamed problem away. However, it remained for the rest of his earthly life. Yet Paul could write these words in II Corinthians 12:9-10: *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 about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. <sup>10</sup> That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong. It is in this kind of battle that Paul's words in Romans 8:37 are grounded: *No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us.* His words are not motivated by the power of positive thinking. Paul would have had no time for such theories. Instead, an unshakeable trust in the Sovereign God who loved Him and sent Jesus to die in his place on the cross ensured that Paul would face all these things with confidence and through the enabling power of the Holy Spirit.

(d) **We know that God works for the good of those who love Him** It is not a general promise or assurance here for every person alive on the planet. This assurance from God is specifically for believers. God has a plan and purpose for the lives of each of His children. We may not comprehend significant aspects of it, but He wants us to know that He cares and understands our circumstances and that He is at work for our good in the circumstances experienced by those who have put their faith and trust in Him. Solomon, in his prayers of dedication of the Jerusalem Temple used these words in II Chronicles 6:14-15: *He said: 'Lord, the God of Israel, there is no God like You in heaven or on earth – You who keep Your covenant of love with Your servants who continue wholeheartedly in Your way.'* <sup>15</sup> *You have kept Your promise to Your servant David my father; with Your mouth You have promised and with Your hand You have fulfilled it – as it is today.* As a child of God your life is not without meaning or purpose. It is not futile or a pointless exercise. A little child on earth may have little comprehension of what their parent or parents do for them to demonstrate their love. Later in life we can get a better perspective but rarely at the time. Children of God are probably in the same position. What we need to remind ourselves at times is that not only do we love God but that even more significant is His amazing love for us in Jesus and His covenant with us in Him which we commemorate every time we come to the Lord's Table.

(e) **We know that God works for good...for those called according to His purpose** Our love for Him follows not precedes His love for us. I John 4:9-11 states: *This is how God showed His love among us: He sent His one and only Son into the world that we might live through Him.* <sup>10</sup> *This is love: not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.* <sup>11</sup> *Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.* God's eternal purposes and His prior call to His people precede our love for and faith in Him. He goes before us each step of the way. To the exiles in Babylon He can declare through Jeremiah: *For I know the plans I have for you,' declares the Lord, 'plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.'* <sup>12</sup> *Then you will call on Me and come and pray to Me,*

and I will listen to you. <sup>13</sup> You will seek Me and find Me when you seek Me with all your heart. <sup>14</sup> I will be found by you,' declares the Lord, 'and will bring you back from captivity. I will gather you from all the nations and places where I have banished you,' declares the Lord, 'and will bring you back to the place from which I carried you into exile.' (Jeremiah 29:11-14) This statement opens a window into what Paul will share next in Romans 8:29-30. Romans 8:28 is a precious verse with its five clear affirmations of truths each Christian can know in their minds and hearts.

## 2. **Paul's Undeniable Affirmations** (Romans 8:29-30)

<sup>29</sup> 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. <sup>30</sup> And those He predestined, He also called; those He called, He also justified; those He justified, He also glorified. (Romans 8:29-30)

These five links in the glorious chain of redemption underlie the confidence the apostle has communicated in Romans 8:28. They are precious truths often ignored or misunderstood by many Christians today.

(a) **God foreknew...** The popular understanding of this word suggests that what Paul means here is that God knew in advance who would want to put their faith and trust in Him and so He ensured their preference happened with His future work in their lives. This is a misunderstanding of the term. The Hebrew verb here *yada* is not used to refer to mere intellectual knowledge of something. It is a statement concerning a personal relationship between the individuals mentioned in the statement. For example, with reference to the nation of Israel, in Amos 3:2 God declares: *'You only have I chosen (yada known) of all the families of the earth;* in Hosea 13:5, speaking of the wilderness wanderings after the exodus from Egypt, God declared: *I cared for [yada knew] you in the desert, in the land of burning heat.* The same idea is communicated by Paul in Romans 11:2: *God did not reject his people, whom He foreknew...* John Murray, in his Romans commentary suggests that this term is 'practically synonymous with 'love'... to know with particular...delight, affection and action' (J. Murray, *Romans*, p.317). At the human level a couple post conception may grow in love for the baby growing in the mother's womb. With the modern technology available today through which pictures or even videos can be taken (Ruth and Tom's baby Isdale May 14) the bond will inevitably deepen as the progress of the growing child is followed, but how much more this is experienced once the child is born. God loved you from eternity and planned to send Jesus to die to save you on the cross and what is more has planned out a glorious future for you beyond the grave. Hallelujah! In the words of Moses in Deuteronomy 7:7-9 the sense of this term is captured beautifully: *The Lord did not set His affection on you and choose you because you were more numerous than other peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples. <sup>8</sup> But it was because the Lord loved you and kept the oath He swore to your ancestors that He brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the land of slavery, from the power of Pharaoh king of Egypt. <sup>9</sup> Know therefore that the Lord your God is God; He is the faithful God, keeping His covenant of love to a thousand generations of those who love Him and keep His commandments.* This is what motivates God's actions towards you and me in Christ. At the human level we can rightly be suspicious of someone's motives for carrying out certain actions. Here it is clear what motivates the Lord to save us –His amazing love to the undeserving!

(b) **God predestined...** This term simply means what someone planned in advance that they would do in the future. One of the most well-known passages that uses this term is Acts 4:24-28 where the Early Church in Jerusalem met to praise God for the release of Peter and John from prison: *When they heard this, they raised their voices together in prayer to God. 'Sovereign Lord,' they said, 'You made the heavens and the earth and the sea, and everything in them. <sup>25</sup> You spoke by the Holy Spirit through the mouth of Your servant, our father David: "Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain? <sup>26</sup> The kings of the earth rise up and the rulers band*

together against the Lord and against His anointed one.”<sup>27</sup> Indeed Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel in this city to conspire against Your holy servant Jesus, whom You anointed. <sup>28</sup>They did what Your power and will **had decided beforehand** (predestined) should happen. The people responsible for putting Jesus on the cross, listed in these verses, acted freely in making the choices for which they are fully responsible. Yet at the very same time God’s sovereign will was done to ensure that we could become part of God’s family by grace through faith alone. God is totally sovereign and we are totally responsible –both truths must be held together! Therefore, we will never look down on other people because we are Christians and they are still to come to faith in Jesus. We are not better than anyone else. We are an incredibly privileged people whose minds God has opened to grasp the truth of the Gospel enabling us to come to faith in Him. The blessing of predestination is supremely this that I am totally secure in Christ. I am saved because God loves me! I am saved because God loved me enough to send Jesus to die in my place so that I could be credited with His right-standing (righteousness) before the Father. The second blessing is prayer. I can pray for my family, friends and colleagues to be saved by talking to the very One who opens minds and hearts to bring them to faith. Every Christian who earnestly prays for someone to come to faith acknowledges in their prayers that we need God to save that person. A person who truly grasps this truth will not be arrogant or look down on others because our salvation is all of grace. They will not be anxious day by day, worried in case they have a bad day, spiritually speaking, and at risk of losing their salvation. We do have our days of doubts and fears, the extent of which is affected by our temperament; also possibly by our state of health or other pressures of life. It should not lead to a lack of desire for mission and ministry. Paul expressed it so well in Philippians 2:14-15 where he made this plea to these mainly Greek Christians: *...continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling,* <sup>13</sup>*for it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfil His good purpose.* In Acts 13:47-48 Luke records Paul’s words during an evangelistic outreach meeting in Pisidian Antioch (Turkey): *For this is what the Lord has commanded us: “I have made you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth.”* <sup>48</sup>*When the Gentiles heard this, they were glad and honoured the word of the Lord; and all who were appointed for eternal life believed.* John Stott sums up this doctrine beautifully: ‘So the doctrine of divine predestination promotes humility, not arrogance; assurance not apprehension; responsibility, not apathy; holiness, not complacency; and mission not privilege (J. Stott, *Romans*, p. 252).

(c) **God called...** The term ‘call’ or ‘calling’ can be used in different ways, but what they all have in common is that they take place in time. There is a general call or invitation we make personally or a preacher may make in a service; or the response by faith we may make to the challenge presented to us (Romans 10:14-15); but here it is the internal specific and effectual call of the Holy Spirit into our hearts and minds that leads us to commit our lives to the Lord Jesus Christ. Paul wrote: *But we ought always to thank God for you, brothers and sisters loved by the Lord, because **God chose you** as firstfruits to be saved through the sanctifying work of the Spirit and through belief in the truth.* <sup>14</sup>***He called you** to this through our gospel that you might share in the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ.* A point made earlier in Romans 8:28 where we are those *who have been **called** according to His purpose.* Every conversion is a miracle of the work of the Holy Spirit. In spiritual terms it is as dramatic as the raising of Lazarus from death in the tomb. The account of that miracle in John 11 is truly astonishing. In the full sight of a crowd of people Jesus orders a grave stone removed from the tomb of a man dead for days. John writes: <sup>41</sup>*So they took away the stone. Then Jesus looked up and said, ‘Father, I thank You that You have heard Me.* <sup>42</sup>*I knew that You always hear Me, but I said this for the benefit of the people standing here, that they may believe that You sent Me.* <sup>43</sup>*When He had said this, Jesus called in a loud voice, ‘Lazarus, come out!’* <sup>44</sup>*The dead man came out, his hands and feet wrapped with strips of linen, and a cloth round his face. Jesus said to them, ‘Take off the grave clothes and let him go’ (John*

11:41-43). We must never forget when we are seeking to spread the good news that prayer is so important for God to awaken people who are spiritually dead (unreceptive) to the Gospel. In Ephesians 2:4-5 Paul declared: *But because of His great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, <sup>5</sup>made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions – it is by grace you have been saved.* Remember in your witnessing that God must open someone's heart to see their need of Jesus before they will respond, but because God's plans for His Church will be successful. In His time there is a harvest of salvation for those who faithfully sow the seed of the Gospel.

(d) **God justified...** Paul has addressed in some detail the truths of justification in Romans 5. The fact that Jesus took our place as our substitute and sin-bearer on the cross; taking our sin and its punishment so that through His perfect once-for-all time sacrifice we might be placed in a position of right-standing before God; that through this transformation received by His grace we have direct access into God's presence in prayer and a welcome into His family for ever. We are 'in Christ'; our union with Him is brought about through our justification. In Paul's extraordinary words in II Corinthians 5:21: *God made Him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God.* When we grasp what this means it can make us want to dance for joy thrilled at the wonder of the Gospel of Jesus.

(e) **God glorified...** Paul in Romans 8:17 has already linked our identification in His sufferings in the service of God ...*in order that we may also share in His glory.* We will one day share it, as will God's creation (Romans 8:21); Our destiny beyond this life is to be like Jesus. This is the purpose of this work of God in our lives. Notice Romans 8:29: *...to be conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters.* That is like Him in his humanity (not His deity- the Mormon error); one day in God's new creation we will live lives in their fullness without the frustrations and disappointments of life in the world as we know it, marred by sin and selfishness. In each of the links of the chain of redemption Paul has used the Greek aorist tense, which is used to denote an event completed at a definite time in the past. Every stage described as is certain as if the future were the past! James Denny, a famous Bible commentator of a hundred years ago and a former Minister of the East Kirk in Broughty Ferry, noted here: 'the tense in the last word is amazing. It is the most daring anticipation of faith that even the New Testament contains.' (J. Denny, 'Romans', *Expositor's Greek Testament*, Vol.2, p. 652)

The links of this chain are the joining of God's actions in the lives of His people. This is why Romans 8:28 is such an anchor to us as Christians in the storms of life. God is at work for our good and for His glory in all the circumstances we experience be they good or bad, sad or happy or somewhere in between. Therefore we can have joy in our hearts as we trust Him with our futures, for Jesus' sake Amen.