

Main Idea: In Romans 8:28-30 God’s Word lays before us the promise of a good outcome. Specifically, we can be sure of a good outcome in two areas.

- I. We can be sure of a good outcome in our suffering (28a).
 - A. We know that suffering is inevitable in this age.
 - B. We know that God is in control of all things.
 1. He is sovereign over what comes into our lives.
 2. He is good in His intent for our lives.
 3. He is wise in the way He orchestrates the details of our lives.
 - C. We know that God is at work in our lives.
 1. Nothing can ultimately harm God's people.
 2. Nothing can hinder God's plan.
- II. We can be sure of a good outcome in our salvation (28b-30).
 - A. God has a people (28).
 1. They are called by God.
 2. They love God.
 - B. God has a purpose (29).
 1. His aim is to exalt His Son.
 2. His aim is to form a people like His Son.
 - C. God has a plan (30).
 1. Our salvation involves a completed past work.
 2. Our salvation involves a completed present work.
 3. Our salvation involves a completed future work.

Response: What should we do with this promise?

1. Learn it.
2. Live in light of it, especially when the hard times come.
3. Love God for it.

Last week we began a series of messages I’m calling, “*Promises to Live By in the Crucible of Suffering.*” God has given us some amazing, hope-giving promises in His Word, and we’ll be looking at several, one per week. Last week it was the promise of a way of escape, from 1 Corinthians 10:13. This week, it’s His promise of a good outcome in Romans 8:28-30.

I just finished reading a heart-gripping book last week called *Running for My Life: One Lost Boy's Journey from the Killing Fields of Sudan to the Olympic Games.* It’s the true story of Lopez Lomong. I’d like to take a few minutes to tell his story because it’s a powerful illustration of the text we’ll be considering today.

Lopez was only six years old when soldiers invaded a church service and stole him from his parents, who, of course, tried to save him, but were powerless to prevent the men with the guns from taking him, throwing him into the back of a covered truck, and speeding away. The kidnappers planned on turning him into a child-soldier, but he was too small, so they left him in a hut, essentially to die.

One night three weeks later, three older boys invited him to try and escape with them, promising him they would take him home. And so, while the guards were looking the other way, they fled their hut and ran for their lives. They ran all night long, hid during the day, ran all night long a second night, and then a third. Unfortunately, these

^{**}Note: This is an unedited manuscript of a message preached at Wheelersburg Baptist Church. It is provided to prompt your continued reflection on the practical truths of the Word of God.

¹ For a treatment of this entire passage, see the series on Romans 5-8 preached at WBC in 1995.

Sudanese boys were running in the wrong direction, and were captured, this time by the Kenyan border guards, and placed in Kakuma, a refugee camp in Kenya.

Lopez spent the next ten years in that refugee camp. In his own words, “Kakuma was created as a temporary place where displaced people would be safe until the war in Sudan ended. Today, twenty years later, fifty thousand people not only from Sudan but also from Somalia, Ethiopia, Burundi, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Eritrea, Uganda, and Rwanda call Kakuma home.”²

In Kakuma, Lopez lived in a tent called “camp section 58” with ten other boys. They ate one meal a day, some grain. “Tuesdays were the high point of our week, the one day we ate well,” says Lopez, “the day we ate garbage.”³

“On Sunday we went to church instead of school. It was my favorite day of the week. Everything was good on Sundays. I didn’t have to think about food or anything else. Instead, I lost myself singing praises to God. I knew He was there with me. I never, ever doubted that fact for a moment.”⁴

One day he was feeling sorry for himself, and a friend in the refugee camp told him, “You cannot sit and wish for something that is never going to happen, or you will lose your mind. No, you must focus on here and now. Do your chores. Go to school. Keep your mind busy. The past is gone. It will not come back. You must live in this day.”⁵

Pretty wise counsel, wouldn’t you say, especially coming from a mere boy in a refugee camp? Lopez took the counsel to heart, and developed a new perspective. “What is the point of such complaining?” he writes. “After all the whining and complaining is over, you still live in a refugee camp. All the complaining in the world will not make your life any better. Instead, you must choose to make the best of whatever the situation in which you find yourself, even in a place like Kakuma.”⁶

The highlight of the day for Lopez and his friends was playing soccer. But since there were so many boys that wanted to play, the older boys made a rule. You have to run around the camp before you can play. That’s 18 miles. And so Lopez ran it, every day, 18 miles, just so he could then play soccer.

About this point in the book you might find yourself thinking, “What a terrible thing for a little boy to endure! Being taken from his family in Sudan, running for his life to escape the soldiers only to end up in refugee camp in Kenya, being forced to run just so he could play soccer? What a meaningless string of cruel and haphazard circumstances!”

I say *might* find yourself thinking that *if*...you didn’t know the promise of God that we’re going to consider this morning in Romans 8:28-30. Actually, there’s nothing haphazard at all about the life of Lopez Lomong, nor about your life and mine. I’ll tell you what happened to Lopez a little later, but first, I want us to consider carefully the

² Lomong, Lopez (2012-07-17). *Running for My Life: One Lost Boy's Journey from the Killing Fields of Sudan to the Olympic Games* (p. 35). Thomas Nelson. Kindle Edition.

³ Lomong, Lopez (2012-07-17). *Running for My Life: One Lost Boy's Journey from the Killing Fields of Sudan to the Olympic Games* (p. 38). Thomas Nelson. Kindle Edition.

⁴ Lomong, Lopez (2012-07-17). *Running for My Life: One Lost Boy's Journey from the Killing Fields of Sudan to the Olympic Games* (p. 42). Thomas Nelson. Kindle Edition.

⁵ Lomong, Lopez (2012-07-17). *Running for My Life: One Lost Boy's Journey from the Killing Fields of Sudan to the Olympic Games* (p. 44). Thomas Nelson. Kindle Edition.

⁶ Lomong, Lopez (2012-07-17). *Running for My Life: One Lost Boy's Journey from the Killing Fields of Sudan to the Olympic Games* (p. 39). Thomas Nelson. Kindle Edition.

amazing promise that his life illustrates, *the promise of a good outcome* in Romans 8:28-30.

My friends, the Bible you hold teaches that God is sovereign, that is, He is in absolute control of everything that happens in His universe. But He's not just in control of everything. He orchestrates everything to accomplish His good plan. Do you believe that?

We have the privilege this morning to consider what is perhaps the most hope-giving passage in the Bible, Romans 8:28-30. The truth of God's sovereignty is not a dry, abstract doctrine applicable only to theologians tucked away in some seminary library. The truth of God's sovereignty can change our whole perspective on life, especially when it gets hard.

According to Romans 8:28-3, we can be sure of a good outcome in two areas.

I. We can be sure of a good outcome in our suffering (28a).

Verse 28 begins, "And we know." Stop there. Who is 'we'? Paul is writing, and he is speaking in behalf of people he calls "saints" in verse 27, a term that identifies people whom God has set apart and are in a saving relationship with His Son. "We know" is used five times in Romans. In verse 26 Paul confessed that sometimes Christians DON'T KNOW what to pray, and that we should pray anyway because the Spirit will help us, and the Father KNOWS the mind of the Spirit (27). Now we're told, "We know."

What do we know? According to verse 28, we can be sure of three things pertaining to our suffering.

A. We know that suffering is inevitable in this age. The first century Jews viewed history as comprised of two ages: this age, and the coming age. This age is characterized by suffering, while the age to come (which will be inaugurated by the entrance of the Messiah) will be known for glory.

We see this truth developed earlier in Romans 8. For instance, Paul contrasts the suffering and glory in verse 17, and says, "If indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory." We see the same dual-age-contrast in verse 18, "I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us."

So we are living in an age of suffering. We groan and wait like a mother in labor, says Paul in verse 22. We know that suffering is inevitable in this age. There's a second truth we know.

B. We know that God is in control of all things. And that includes our suffering. The Creator God is not a wimpy God. In fact, there are three things about Him that will sustain our lives during the inevitable times of suffering.

1. *He is sovereign over what comes into our lives.* No mistakes. No accidents. No out of control situations.

2. *He is good in His intent for our lives.* God is good. Whatever He does is good. His intent for our lives is good. More about His good intent in a moment.

3. *He is wise in the way He orchestrates the details of our lives.* He is like a craftsman weaving a beautiful tapestry. He doesn't just use the bright, beautiful colors, but weaves in the blacks and dark blues and deep grays. He knows the finished

product He's heading for, and in His wisdom He twists into our lives what's needed to bring about the glorious end result.

By the way, when you're in the middle of a dark season of life, you'll find occasion to question those three divine attributes. Is God really sovereign? Is He really good? Is He really wise? But it's then we must, by faith, affirm what we do not feel and cannot see. Lord God, You are sovereign, You are good, and You are wise.

There's a third thing we know, and it's this...

C. We know that God is at work in our lives. Our text says, "And we know that in all things God *works*." God is not just in control. He is at work. And He is not just at work in the big scheme of things in His universe. He is at work *in our lives*.

No verse in the Bible makes this more clear than Romans 8:28. The late Dr. Reuben A. Torrey called this verse "a soft pillow for a tired heart."⁷ A lot of us have put our heads on the pillow of Romans 8:28, haven't we? I remember hearing our dear sister in Christ, Nancy Rae Litteral, a quadriplegic who spent over 50 years in a wheel chair because a drunk driver hit her at the age of 18, refer to Romans 8:28 as the theme verse of her life.

"And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose." Before delving into what this verse is saying, allow me to point out what it is NOT saying.

Romans 8:28 does not say that all things are good. This is not an endorsement of a stoic approach to life. Evil is not good. When a drunk driver maims a child for life, that is not good. When a stepfather molests a helpless little one, that is not good. Dying of terminal cancer is not good. These are horrible consequences of living in a sin-cursed world.

But know this. Even though these events may not be good, Romans 8:28 says that they can work together for good. What does that mean? It means we can make two affirmations.

1. *Nothing can ultimately harm God's people.* Again, Paul says, "WE know." This verse is not speaking to non-Christians, though God is certainly sovereign over the affairs of their lives too. But we who know Christ know something. We know that nothing ultimately can harm us. We know who we are and where we are going. We are God's people. Even death cannot really harm us, for death is merely the door to our eternal glory. That's why when Paul himself was facing possible execution, he could testify, "For me to live is Christ, and to die is GAIN (Phil 1:21)." Since God is in control, nothing can ultimately harm God's people.

This promise also means we can make a second affirmation.

2. *Nothing can hinder God's plan.* Paul explains what that plan is in verse 29, as we'll see in a moment, but the essence of the plan is this. God's plan is to exalt His Son, and to form a people that resemble His Son. Here's what is amazing. God is great enough to use even tragedy to accomplish this plan. He did it for His own Son, and He does it for us. All things work together for good for the people of God.

Joseph discovered that. He lost the prime of his life when his jealous brothers sold him into slavery, and even lost his reputation when he was unjustly framed, and had

⁷ McGee, p. 156.

to serve time in prison. But remember what Joseph later said about his ordeal? Speaking to his guilty brothers, he said in Genesis 50:19-20, “Don’t be afraid. Am I in the place of God? You intended to harm me (the KJV says, “You thought evil against me.” That’s key. Joseph called what they did *evil*), but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives.”

For we know that all things work together for good.

Beloved, though we live in an age of suffering, we can know this. God is in sovereign control of our suffering. Let that sink in. Do you have scars in your life from past hurt? If you do, you have a choice to make. You can be bitter and angry towards the world, towards people, and even towards God. Or, you can live in light of Romans 8:28. You can say, “O Sovereign God, I humbly confess that You are in control. You are so great that You can use even my pain to advance Your plan. I choose to trust You today.”

Job lost ten children, just about all of his possessions, and yet while sitting in a pile of ashes with boils all over his body he could say, “Though He slay me, yet will I trust in Him (Job 13:15).” Job chose to *trust* God.

All of us can look back at things in our lives which, at the time, we thought were disasters, but turned out for our good. And there may be tragedies we’ll never fully understand this side of glory, yet the promise of Romans 8:28 remains true. There are no accidents, no surprises with God. And because of that we can be sure of a good outcome in our suffering.

But that’s not all. We can be sure of a good outcome in second area as well, as Paul explains next.

II. We can be sure of a good outcome in our salvation (28b-30).

Unfortunately, though we receive great comfort in knowing that God is sovereign over our suffering, some people are threatened by the suggestion that He is sovereign in the area of our salvation. So before we even look at the next section of verses, I want to lay on the table three potential responses.

One is pride. I well remember seeing how some classmates in college responded when they first learned that God is sovereign in our salvation. They became smug and haughty, and looked down on others who didn’t know the truth they’d just learned. The problem wasn’t with the doctrine they learned, but with their proud hearts.

A second potential response is denial. Some will see what the Bible says, and will think, “I don’t care what the Bible says. I don’t think it’s fair. It doesn’t make sense to me so I refuse to believe in election and predestination.” That’s unfortunate. I believe with the assessment of a radio Bible teacher who’s now in heaven, J. Vernon McGee, who said, “This is not a frightful doctrine; it is a wonderful doctrine.”⁸

That brings us to the third potential response, which is humble and grateful acceptance. Is God good? I don’t have to figure Him out to know He is. Is His Word good? Certainly, even if my finite little mind can’t process it entirely. We must never be afraid of doctrine, nor should we ever apologize for God’s truth. It’s good. We must humbly and gratefully accept what God says, no more, no less.

⁸ McGee, p. 161.

Now we're ready to investigate the text. We're going to make three concluding statements from this text pertaining to the good outcome in our salvation.

A. God has a people (28). Notice how Paul describes Christians in verse 28, "To them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose." We're told two characteristics of God's people. One emphasizes God's sovereignty, the other human responsibility in salvation.

1. *They are called by God.* "Who have been called according to his purpose [KJV 'who are the called according to his purpose]." The Bible teaches that God extends a general call to all people to be saved (such as in Matthew 11:28, "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest."). But God also extends a special, effectual call, and this is what Paul has in mind in Romans 8.

Christians are those who have been "called" by God. Paul specifies who receives this calling in verse 30, "And those he predestined, he also called." The apostle used this term to identify the readers of this letter as he began back in Romans 1:6, 7, "And you also are among those who are *called* to belong to Jesus Christ. To all in Rome who are loved by God and *called* to be saints."

According to 1 Corinthians 1:23-24, there are three categories of people in the world. Paul says, "But we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews [category #1], and foolishness to Gentiles [category #2], but to those whom God has *called* [category #3], both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God." *Called* here refers to God's special and effectual call. It's referring to a people that, though they don't deserve it, have been chosen by God (that's the term Paul uses in Romans 8:33, "those whom God has chosen," also called "the elect" in other passages). And these whom God has chosen and called are "born from above" into the family of God (John 1:13).

There's a second characteristic of God's people in verse 28.

2. *They love God.* "All things work for the good of those who love him." Here we see man's responsibility. Those whom God calls respond with love and devotion to His gracious call. A true Christian is a person who loves God. The essence of the Christian life is loving God.

You say, "So how is a person saved then?" The Bible answers that question from two perspectives and in this verse we see both. The Bible emphasizes both the sovereign choice of God and the subsequent response of individuals. Christians are those who have both been called of God and in turn love God. We must affirm both God's sovereignty and human responsibility in salvation.

Charles Haddon Spurgeon, that great preacher from the past century, was once asked if he could reconcile these two truths to each other. He replied, "I wouldn't try. I never reconcile friends."⁹ Friends? Yes, friends. J. I. Packer, in his helpful book, *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God*, explains, "In the Bible, divine sovereignty and human responsibility are not enemies. They are not uneasy neighbours; they are not in an endless state of cold war with each other. They are *friends*, and they work together."¹⁰

So God has a people. That brings us to a second concluding statement.

⁹ Taken from J. I. Packer, *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God*, 35.

¹⁰ Packer, pp. 35-36.

B. God has a purpose (29). Specifically, He has a purpose in mind for the people He calls to Himself? What is that purpose? He has two related aims in mind according to the explanation given in verse 29.

1. *His aim is to exalt His Son.* Verse 29 begins, “For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness [KJV ‘image’] of His Son.” God's purpose is first to exalt His Son. But how has God chosen to exalt His Son?

2. *His aim is to form a people like His Son.* Don't miss the purpose clause at the end of verse 29, “*That* he might be the firstborn among many brothers.” There's God's agenda. It's why He chose you and me, brothers and sisters. He wants us individually and collectively to look like Jesus.

And here's where the “all things” of Romans 8:28 comes in. Did Jesus suffer? Yes. Did He experience injustice and pain and hardship? Yes. So if we're going to resemble Him, we're going to experience some of the things He experienced.

Granted, we'll never experience the fullness of what He encountered. He didn't just suffer. He endured infinite suffering on the cross, as He took our place and endured the penalty we deserved to pay for our sins. We're not saved by our suffering, but by believing in His.

But once saved, once we've become God's child, we can be sure of God's intent to use all things to transform us into the likeness of His Son.

And that brings us to our third concluding statement, which comes out of verse 30.

C. God has a plan (30). I need to point out to you that all the verbs in verse 30 are aorist tense in the Greek, and that means they depict activities that have already been completed in the plan of God. Our salvation involves three completed works.

1. *Our salvation involves a completed past work.* Verse 30 states, “And those he predestined, he also called.”

In His all-knowing mind, before He ever created the universe, God foreknew and predestined a people that His Son would save and who would then become like His Son. And those He predestined, He called. Nothing can stand in the way of the fulfillment of God's salvation plan.

Please notice from verse 28 that we are called according to God's *purpose*, not according to His foreknowledge. The Bible does not teach that God chose His people because He foreknew what they would do. It says He called a people according to His purpose. Romans 8 doesn't talk about *what* God foreknew, but *whom* He foreknew.

In 2 Tim 1:9, the apostle contemplated the sovereign work of God in salvation, “Who has saved us, and called us with an holy calling, not according to our works, but *according to His own purpose and grace*, which was given us in Christ Jesus before the world began.”

Years ago there was a boy down south that wanted to join a church. The deacons examined him and asked, “How did you get saved?” His answer was, “God did His part, and I did my part.” They thought something was wrong with his doctrine so they questioned him further. “What was God's part and what was your part?” His explanation was a good one. “God's part was the saving, and my part was the sinning. I done run

from Him as fast as my sinful heart and rebellious legs could take me. He done took out after me till he run me down."¹¹

2. *Our salvation involves a completed present work.*

Verse 30 continues, "Those He called, He also justified." God *declared righteous* those whom He called. Justification is the theme of Rom 1-5. God justifies a sinner the moment he or she places his or her faith in Christ and His finished work on the cross.

3. *Our salvation involves a completed future work.* The end of verse 30 tells us, "Those he justified, he also glorified." That's astounding! From our perspective, this glorification is future, but in God's all-knowing mind, we are as good as glorified already. If we have been justified, we are also glorified, for He sees the outcome of it all.

You say, "Why isn't sanctification mentioned in this verse?" E. F. Harrison suggests, "It is probably left out deliberately because sanctification is the one area in which human cooperation is essential."¹² God predestinated. God called. God justified. God glorified. We didn't contribute to these activities, but were God's alone. But when it comes to sanctification (living a life of holiness), the Bible calls for our cooperation.

So God has a people, a purpose for those people, and a plan to bring it all about. What's that mean for us? It means that if we've been saved, we can be sure of a good outcome, in our present suffering, and ultimately in our eternal salvation. God doesn't do things half way. What He starts, He finishes.

That, my friend, is a promise to live by, especially when you're in the crucible of suffering.

At this beginning of this message I told you about Lopez Lomong and left you hanging as he was running 18 miles a day around his refugee camp just to earn the right to play soccer. A meaningless cruelty? No. In the end, our sovereign, good, and wise God used it to save his life.

One night in the year 2000, Lopez ventured outside the camp to local farmer's house where he saw a black and white television connected to a car battery. The owner told him that for the price of five shillings, he could watch the Olympics. He had no idea what the Olympics were, he said, but he knew it involved running. So he paid the money, the only coin he had, and there on the screen he saw a man named Michael Johnson with the letters USA on his shirt, with thousands of people cheering him on. What first impressed Lopez was that this man had the same skin color. What next impressed him was his speed as he won the 400 meter dash. But what most impressed him was what he did when took the stand to receive his medal.

"Michael Johnson did something African men never do," said Lopez. "He wept openly and without shame. I shook my head in disbelief and leaned closer to the screen. Why was he crying? I wondered. How can a man like this, a man who just won an Olympic gold medal, show such emotion? In my culture, such a display was a sign of weakness. Yet Michael Johnson had just proven his strength and confidence to the world. Why, then, did he cry?"¹³

¹¹ Story told by McGee, 159.

¹² Harrison, p. 98.

¹³ Lomong, Lopez (2012-07-17). *Running for My Life: One Lost Boy's Journey from the Killing Fields of Sudan to the Olympic Games* (pp. 55-56). Thomas Nelson. Kindle Edition.

“For a man to react to winning a race in such a manner told me that this had been more than a race. Those letters on his chest and the flag he carried around the track, they had to be the key. Clearly, he was not just running for himself. The gold medal by itself was not enough to bring a real man to tears. No, this man, this man with skin like mine, ran for something bigger than himself. That had to be why he wept.”¹⁴

As Lopez walked back to his Kenyan refugee camp that night, he couldn't shake what he had just seen. He says, “Suddenly, an idea hatched in my brain, an idea that should have struck me as ridiculous, but it did not. To me, this idea made perfect sense. In my mind's eye I watched Michael Johnson run his race over and over again and I knew that someday, I, too, would run in the Olympics. I did not know how, but I knew I would. I now had a dream that changed the course of my life: I would be an Olympian. Moreover, I wanted to run with those same three letters across my chest: USA. I wanted to be like Michael Johnson.”¹⁵

And then Lopez made this incredible statement, “God Himself had brought me to Kakuma. I always thought He must have had a reason for bringing me here. Now I had it. Now I knew where my destiny lay. Michael Johnson opened a wider world to me. By God's grace, I would get there.”¹⁶

You'll have to read the book to find out how it happened, but I will tell you this. Just eight years later in 2008, not only did Lopez run, but he was actually selected by the rest of the American Olympic team to carry the American flag into the Olympic stadium in Beijing.

“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.”

Response: What should we do with this promise?

I urge you to do three things.

1. *Learn it.* Start by putting it on a 3x5 card and reading it every day, and don't stop until it's found a home in your heart. Learn this promise.

2. *Live in light of it, especially when the hard times come.* When you're in the midst of a challenging time, affirm what God says, regardless how you feel. Right now, Lord, I affirm that You are working together all things, even painful things, for my ultimate good, so that I will resemble my Savior and Your beloved Son.

3. *Love God for it.* Express to Him your thanks and devotion and worship for how He is working out His good plan in your life. We don't deserve it, dear friends, but because of His amazing grace, we are forever His, and He is intent on transforming us so we are prepared for His eternal presence. There are a million reasons why we should love Him, and here's yet another. He has given us the promise of a good outcome.

¹⁴ Lomong, Lopez (2012-07-17). *Running for My Life: One Lost Boy's Journey from the Killing Fields of Sudan to the Olympic Games* (p. 56). Thomas Nelson. Kindle Edition.

¹⁵ Lomong, Lopez (2012-07-17). *Running for My Life: One Lost Boy's Journey from the Killing Fields of Sudan to the Olympic Games* (pp. 56-58). Thomas Nelson. Kindle Edition.

¹⁶ Lomong, Lopez (2012-07-17). *Running for My Life: One Lost Boy's Journey from the Killing Fields of Sudan to the Olympic Games* (p. 58). Thomas Nelson. Kindle Edition.