



Central Peninsula Church

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Romans 8:28-30
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The Promise of Providence

SERIES: *His Precious and Magnificent Promises*

I would like to start this morning by asking you to use your imagination. Imagine that Jesus walked in this room right now. Imagine that he walked right up this aisle and joined me on this stage to make an announcement. Try to think how you would actually feel if Jesus announced that from this moment forward nothing bad would ever happen to you.

How would you feel as Jesus walked off this platform, back down the aisle, and out the door? Try to think for a minute of the things that cause you anxiety and fear. We all live with fears and worries. Not only do they make us uncomfortable, they leave scars on both our physical and emotional health. Most of you came here this morning with some worry gnawing at you. But with that promise, imagine your relief.

Recently I went to the doctor. My family has a history of both cancer and heart disease so I went as a precaution. After meeting with her I had blood work done at a lab and then I went back to see her again several weeks later. When it was all over she said, "Everything looks good. You have nothing to worry about." I left her office feeling very relieved. But I was only free from worry and fear for about as long as it took me to drive home. Worry has a way of reappearing like one of those games you play at a carnival. The thing sticks its head up like a gopher and you try to hit it, only to find that it comes up somewhere else. The problem is that any number of bad things can happen to us. If it's not a disease, it might be an injury or accident. If it's not an accident, it could be someone else's act of evil. If it's not someone else's act of evil, it could be the consequences of our own acts.

To live where nothing bad can happen would be like being in heaven on earth. But all of us know that we live on earth, not in heaven. Worries and fears are still very much a part of the inner landscape of our lives. What do you fear? What are you worried about? Let's face it, bad things do happen, and it would be a big mistake to call bad things good.

But what if I told you that there IS a certain sense in which Jesus has done just what I said? Though Jesus isn't physically present, he comes to us and speaks to us through his word. In his word he has made us a promise, spoken through his messenger, Paul. In Rom. 8:28 he

says: **"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."**

I. Nothing can thwart God's good purpose for us.

Notice that God's word speaks here about purpose. It tells us that God himself has a purpose. We can understand that language. When we create things we do so for a purpose. Cars, trains and airplanes exist for the purpose of transportation. Houses exist for the purpose of providing shelter and a place for people to call home. Books exist for the purpose of education or enjoyment. Things are created for a purpose. When God created this earth and people like us he did so with a purpose in mind. And it's a purpose that he continues to work out. He didn't wind up the universe and set it in motion and then walk away only to check in once in a while as a passive spectator. He continues to be involved; he continues to work his purpose out.

Notice also that God's purpose is good. As he works out his purpose, he's not "up to no good," as we say. From the very beginning of time his purpose was good. When he created the things of this earth he said that they were good. When he created the human race he said that they were very good. His good purpose was that men and women would enjoy a loving relationship with him forever and bring glory to him as we carry out his mandate to manage his creation. He told Adam and Eve to be fruitful and multiply, fill the earth and subdue it and rule over all the living things on the earth. But he didn't create us as robots. He gave us freedom and we took that freedom and rebelled against him. So sin entered into the human race and with it all the things we call bad – things like disease and death, heartache and sorrow, selfishness and greed, pride and prejudice. But God's purpose hasn't been thwarted. Way back in Genesis 3 he announced to Eve that he had a plan to redeem humanity through her offspring. He would restore the world to its original splendor. He would allow us to experience the glorious possibilities for which we were created. We've seen that right here in Romans 8. Verse 21 talks about how *"creation itself will be set free from its slavery to corruption into the freedom of the glory of the children of God."* That's God's good purpose.

But what is the promise? The promise is that nothing can thwart God's purpose for us. God's good purpose is somehow able to embrace and include "all things." He says "*in all things God works for good...*" Don't get this wrong. He doesn't say that all things are good. Bad things happen. Evil things happen. Painful things; things that crush our spirit; things that leave wounds and scars; things that take the life right out of us; things that Paul lists down in v. 35: tribulation, distress, persecution, famine, nakedness, peril, sword. The verse doesn't say these things are good. It doesn't even say that God causes these things. It says God works in these things for good. He uses even the bad things to accomplish his good purpose. *So, while I can't say that nothing bad will happen to me, I can say that nothing comes to me but what is good for me.* God works even in the bad things to bring about the good. You might call these "bad-good" things. In a temporal sense they're bad; in an ultimate sense they are used for good.

One of the most difficult things about this is that so often these things don't appear to be good for anything. We call them "blessings in disguise" but the problem is that they're exceedingly well-disguised. Sometimes, especially in hindsight, we can see how a very painful thing turned out for the best. Sometimes we can see the reason behind the bad thing. This was the case with Joseph who could say to his brothers, "You meant it for evil, but God meant it for good." He could say that because he could see with the benefit of hindsight that the reason God allowed them to sell him into slavery was because that was necessary for Joseph to eventually be exalted to a place where he could provide for his people during the famine. He saw the reason. Sometimes we see the reason. But God doesn't promise here that we will always be able to see the reason in terms of the good things that come out of the bad. Instead, he says there is a purpose. A reason implies a simple cause and effect relationship, an underlying motive that makes logical sense out of everything in the here and now. But purpose looks at the bigger picture. Purpose doesn't hang on to an explanation; it hangs on to God, who is at work in ways we may not understand until the very end.

A little boy spent the entire afternoon trying to put together a puzzle that his father had given him for his birthday. Some of the pieces were bright, some dark, some seemed to fit together, others seemed to fit nowhere. Finally, he got so frustrated with the whole thing that he gathered the pieces, put them back in the box, and gave it back to his dad. He said, "I can't do it. You do it." His dad opened up the box,

laid out then pieces, and assembled the puzzle in no time. What was the difference? He said to his son, "You see, I used the picture on the front of the box. You saw only the individual pieces; I saw the picture."

The promise is that in all things God works for the good. The "all things" are the pieces of the puzzle, including the dark pieces. But how do they work together for good? Only in view of God's good purpose. That's the picture. Who are we more like, the boy or the father? We're kind of in-between. We're a little like the boy because we can't see how most of the pieces fit together. But we're like the father in that we know they all somehow do fit together, and we have a picture in mind of the beauty of God's ultimate purpose.

So you can see that there is a sense in which Jesus really has come in this place and made this startling announcement. *Nothing will come to me but what is good for me.* Painful things will happen. Tragedies will happen. Disappointments will happen. Evil will happen. But in all those bad things God will work and make a good thing. His purpose will be accomplished not just IN SPITE of those things, but IN those things.

Now you may wonder, how can I really be sure? How can I really know this is true, not just true in general, but true for me? I'm sure you've already noticed that there is an important limitation placed on this promise. This good purpose of God only embraces certain people. He describes them as those who "*love him and are called according to his purpose.*" God does NOT work in all things for the good for all people. He works in all things for the good only in certain people. From the human standpoint, we can identify those people because they love him. But from the divine side we know those people have been called by him, so that their love is a response to his own gracious call. We simply need to ask ourselves, have I responded to God's gracious and loving call to believe in his Son as my Savior and follow him as my Lord? That's what it means to love him. If we've done that, this promise is for us.

But even though we know that, let's face it, we still struggle to believe it. We struggle with the different pieces of our life, especially the darkest pieces, and we wonder how can I really know for sure? The fact is, even as believers, most of us don't live with this kind of absolute confidence. Most of us really don't experience this kind of stability in the face of all things. So Paul wants to build a foundation for us. It's a principle in building that the taller the building the deeper and stronger the foundation has to be underground to support that building. Here we have a massive promise about all of life that is staggering, and so Paul goes on in the two verses that follow it to build a deep

foundation.

II. Our confidence lies in God's decisions from beginning to end.

“And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose. For those whom He foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son, so that He would be the firstborn among many brethren; and these whom He predestined, He also called; and these whom He called, He also justified; and these whom He justified, He also glorified” (Rom. 8:28-30).

Paul says that God has acted in five ways towards his people. Each one of these things is designed to give us confidence, assurance, security and stability that this massive promise is true for us. These decisions span all of time. The first two deal with eternity past. The second two deal with the present. The last deals with the future.

Perhaps the best way to think of these decisions is to think of them like a building program.¹ This church went through a building program a few years back so many of us can relate. In the same way God is building a world wide church not made of bricks but of people. Any building program begins with the selection of a site. God's building program works the same way. He says that in eternity past God foreknew us. This is site selection. God doesn't just start building randomly. A site is chosen. He “foreknows” where, or in whom, he'll work. To “foreknow” means more than that God knows beforehand who will chose him. That would make everything depend on us. It actually means to know in the biblical sense; in the sense that God sets his affection on us. He selects us as the objects of his special love.

After site selection, then the plans for that site are developed. This is site planning. Those whom God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed into the likeness of his own Son. That means God planned beforehand what you would become. It doesn't say God predestined us to believe in him, but rather to become like him. Why did he do that? It says here because he wanted to have many sons who looked like their older brother. That's what it means when he says “...so that he (Jesus) might be the firstborn (first in rank) of many brethren.”

So we have site selection and we have site planning. That's what happened in eternity past. But what about the present? He says “those whom he predestined, he also called.” God's call is the work of site preparation. This building would have never been built without hundreds of phone calls to prepare for the building process. We called architects, contractors, suppliers, city officials,

building inspectors, lawyers and neighbors. When we call these people, we send our voice through telephone lines so others will respond to our needs. In the same way, God calls us. God sends his word through his Spirit so that we'll respond to him in faith. It's not a call that we can ignore. It's an effective call. It's not like me calling my dog, Mitch, who may or may not come. It's more like when Jesus called Lazarus from the grave, “Lazarus, come forth!” He didn't have much of a choice. Without this calling, we could have never responded. Our hearts would have remained cold, hard and hostile to God unless he prepared them to be developed as he intends.

Once all the approvals have been secured, before you build you have to do some site clearing. The area must be flagged for construction. You may have to clear some trees out. You may have to level the ground. You have to get rid of some rock. Every hindrance to the new construction has to be removed. Spiritual construction in our life requires some site clearing. Paul says “those whom he called, he also justified.” Justification is like site clearing because in it God clears our hearts of sin and guilt. In justification God declares us to be righteous. He gives us the gift of righteousness by clearing away our guilt.

Finally, the building process begins and the builder constructs the final edifice. This is site completion. The last thing God does relates to the future: “those whom he justified, he also glorified.” He glorified us. That's the final product of what we shall be. That's the being conformed to the likeness of his Son we read about in v. 29. I love how he puts that in the past tense. It hasn't happened yet, but it's as good as done, so he can talk about it as if it's in the past tense.

Notice he didn't say much at all about the building process. He seems to skip from site clearing to site completion. Where is the process of becoming more like Christ taking place in our life right now? You know where it is? It's up in v. 28. It's the process of God working in all things to accomplish his good purpose of making you look like your older brother. It's God taking the pieces of our lives and using them to make us more like his Son. That's the process. Every piece of the puzzle fits and when it's all done the image is a perfect reflection of the original. With that confidence we can say, *nothing comes to me but what is good for me.*

It's sad that a promise that's meant to inspire confidence and security has often times inspired confusion and debate. We want to ask, where is human freedom in all of this? Are you saying that God chooses

us and we don't choose him? And how could he choose some and not others? I couldn't begin to answer all those questions in one sermon. But I know one thing: I'm so glad that the fulfillment of this promise is in God's hands and not in mine. It says nothing here about what we've done; it's all about God; it's all about decisions that God has made in regard to us. There is no doubt that this passage has to be squared with what the Bible says elsewhere about human accountability. But I'm so glad that my destiny is in his hands, because if it had something to do with me, I would live in fear that I would screw it up.

A man shared his testimony. He told of how God had loved him, called him, saved him, delivered him, cleansed him and healed him. It was a great story with all the glory given to God. But after the meeting, a man pulled him aside and rebuked him. He said, "I appreciate all you said about what God did for you, but you didn't say one thing about your part in it. Salvation is really part us and part God, and you should have said something about your part." The man said, "Oh, I'm sorry. I apologize. You're right, I should have mentioned that. My part was running away, and God's part was running after me until he found me."

God's word says you're secure in this promise because from the beginning to the end, from eternity past to eternity future, it's all about God. If God started something in you, he'll finish it. You see, the chain can't be broken. All whom he foreknew were predestined; all the predestined were called; all the called were justified; and all the justified were glorified. It's like God tips over the first in a long row of dominoes; all of them will eventually go down. It doesn't matter where you are in the chain, if you're somewhere in it, your destiny is secure.

CONCLUSION

I can't promise you that nothing bad will ever happen to you again. But, on the authority of God's word, I can promise you that if you're in that chain, *nothing comes to you but what is good for you*. That means you and I really don't have that much to worry about.

There is a story about Albert Einstein. He was on a train heading for an out of town speaking engagement and the conductor came by to collect his ticket. When Einstein fumbled around in his pockets and bags and couldn't find his ticket, the conductor said, "That's all right Dr. Einstein, I know your name and we have a record of your ticket. Not to worry." So he went on and began punching the tickets of others in that same car. When he was about to leave, he saw Einstein down on his knees trying to find his ticket. Again the conductor tried to assure him, "Sir, it's really okay. I know who you are." Einstein looked up at him and said, "I, too, know who I am, but what I don't know is where I am going!"

You see, our confidence lies not only in the fact that God knows our name, but he knows where we're going. And he has promised that nothing can happen to us that will not move us in the direction of that ultimate goal.

¹This illustration comes out of Bryan Chapell's book, *The Promises of Grace*, published by Baker Books, pp. 77-80.