

The UNSHAKABLE PURPOSE OF GOD through the WINDS OF SUFFERING

Romans 8:28-30

"The rugged hope of the believer is that every one of our agonies becomes an instrument of God's mercy to do us good" ---- John Piper

Introduction: Towering above the skyline of Taipei, Taiwan, rises the astounding edifice called the Taipei 101, aptly named for its 101 floors (1667 feet above ground!). It was the world's tallest building for about 6 years until it was dwarfed by the Burj Khalifa in 2010. What makes this tower particularly impressive is not necessarily its size (which is immense), but what is NOT seen to the casual observer. Taipei is located in the Pacific Ring of Fire, which puts it near active fault lines and potential earthquakes. It also faces regular tropical storms and gale-force winds up to 134 mph. It was built on a layers of soft clay, loose sand, and soft sedimentary rock, where the water table sits perilously close to the surface. Putting these factors together, what was needed to safely house the business inside demanded a **foundation** that went above and beyond the normal perimeters.



Digging 26 stories down (264 feet total) and driving 380 tower bored piles into another 80 meters of bedrock. Walls underground are reinforced with 10-15 feet of concrete, using double strength of the standard commercial mix and using a total of 20,000 cubic meters all together (which sure seems like a lot). It is built to sway and flex in the wind rather than stay rigid, but reduces the amount by 30% from some others, which keeps it upright and the people on floor 101 from completely losing their minds.

What does this illustrate? It is an architectural fact, the bigger the building, the more massive the foundation. The more stable and fixed the foundation, the more **secure** those in the building are, and the more they are able to withstand whatever is thrown at it. There is an obvious overlay to those who are born again followers of Jesus. We have been given a massive promise of **HOPE**, one that looks forward to a glory that awaits, including the ending of groaning and receiving of full adoption, the **redemption of our bodies**. But that **promise** comes in the MIDST OF torrential suffering, pain, and weakness. In fact, Paul names particular things at the end of chapter 8: *tribulation, distress, persecution, famine, nakedness, danger, sword, or even being killed* (8:35-36). None of this, or the things synonymous with these, are inherently **good or pleasant**, but they are real. So how does a profound promise in the midst of massive suffering work? It has to contain a monumental **foundation**, the kind that is often unseen but known, is not always understood but effective.

*The **heart of Romans 8:28-30**: the foundational truth that in the midst of horrendous circumstances, we have both **HOPE & HELP**, in our future and through the work of the Spirit, we can have **security** that all the pieces are working together for our ultimate good as part of God's **unshakable purpose and plan of salvation**.*

Unstoppable Providence of God (28)

And **we know** that for those who love God **all things work together for good**, for those who are called according to his purpose.

If you've been alive and faced hard and painful things ---- whether you are/were a believer or not ---- you have pondered the inevitable questions of: *why does God allow suffering? What's the point? Why does He not end it if He powerful enough to do so?* The "why" questions of life keep parents and pastors employed for sure, but there are clear answers to these questions, but they are framed categorically in a **DIVINE PERSPECTIVE** first and primarily, with mankind being downstream. In other words, God gives us HIS reasons ---- at least those that are enough for us ---- but not everything. We want answers **starting with us and working up**, but that is not how God operates. So God gives us the answers that **can be** satisfying, understood, and hopeful, but we must see them properly or we will be left wandering.

1. God wants us to KNOW answers to the 'why' questions –

There are some reasons why a parent would NOT give a young child the answer to their question: *the child would not be able to comprehend the complexity of the answer yet* (i.e. where do babies come from, where does the rain come from, why does daddy act like a jr. higher?), or *the parent does not KNOW the answer* (can you explain photosynthesis and use diagrams?). But when it comes to God's purpose and our security in salvation, He wants us to know. The word here is a settled, objective, and convictional knowledge, grounded in the very character of God. When it comes to God's sovereignty in both suffering and salvation, we have a myriad of questions, some of which we cannot comprehend and some God does not reveal, but the center set of knowledge in terms of eternal security and God's providential control of all things is given so that we would KNOW fully.

2. God gives hope uniquely for those that are His –

Seeing life through a lens of God's absolute sovereignty is the solution and reason for hope in all of life's hardships. Notice there are qualifications of whom He is addressing: it is **"for those"**, which Paul addresses twice here and in verse 29. It is clear that Paul is NOT addressing ALL of humanity, but those who have been declared righteous in Jesus Christ and thus are born again. It also is clear that **God is presented as the subject**, the main actor in the action, and Paul is describing divine orchestration. Those who are secure in the midst of suffering and have hope in the midst of groaning are those who have a true, new love for God, and those who are called out for His greater purpose.

1 John 4:7-8; 19 – "Beloved, let us love one another, *for love is from God*, and whoever loves *has been born of God and knows God*. 8 Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love... *We love because he first loved us.*"

Ephesians 1:11 "In him we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to the purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel of his will"

Those who love God can only do so because God loved first, demonstrating that love that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us (Rom. 5:8). One of the marks of a redeemed, reconciled, and restored person is that they love God, which is a primary fulfillment of God's Great Command (Matt. 22:37-38). But we are also called to be believers by a divine call, rather than our human search. God calls us to Himself, and it serves HIS GREATER PURPOSE. What that purpose IS will be explained in the sentences to follow.

3. God puts all the pieces together for purposely for our good –

It is vitally important that we see what this verse says and does not say. It does NOT say that all things that happen to us are **inherently good** or **painless**, nor does it reject the fact that there is real wickedness and evil in the world. Much like other favorite verses that we can take out of context (*"I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me..."* – Phil. 4:13), we must see this verse in light of the greater context so that we do not use it wrongly, as a mere platitude or piece of Christian jargon. When someone is facing the loss of a loved one, a painful diagnosis, or consequence of living as a Christian, it is not always helpful to say "It's ok, God's working it for you good!". **But what does it mean?**

To truly see the "good" in suffering, we must see every aspect, every moment, every interaction, every circumstance through the greater purpose of God, which is explained in the next verse. This is NOT a new truth or reality. Let's get a brief look at how God has worked and explained Himself throughout Biblical history.

The Life Arc of Joseph –

One of the clearest examples of how God uses suffering and evil intentions against us for good is seen in Joseph, one of Jacob's young and beloved son by Rachel, who was perhaps a bit punky early on, but was unceremoniously sold by his brothers to slavery. But decades later, it was clear that this did not thwart God's plan nor was it unknown to Him, but was used by God to accomplish something greater:

Genesis 50:20 *"As for you, **you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good**, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today."*

Though there was true **evil** perpetrated against Joseph, God used it to save His people in Egypt during famine, which was also part of an even greater plan to grow, consolidate, and bring them out of Egypt into the land of Promise.

The Time of Israel between Egypt & Promised Land –

Why did God allow the nation to experience time in a hard and desolate place before bringing them into the Promised land? He wanted to do them good in order to prepare them for His purpose:

Deuteronomy 8:14b-16 – *"you forget the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, 15 who led you through the great and **terrifying wilderness**, with its **fiery serpents** and **scorpions** and **thirsty ground** where there was no water, who brought you water out of the flinty rock, 16 who fed you in the wilderness with **manna** that your fathers did not know, that he might **humble you and test you, to do you good in the end.**"*

The Time of Judah's Exile in Babylon – Though the exile was based largely on the sin of the people and God's judgment on them, this still all played out for their good, since it was still part of God's plan and ultimate purpose.

Jeremiah 24:5-7 *"Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel: Like these good figs, so **I will regard as good** the exiles from Judah, whom I have sent away from this place to the land of the Chaldeans. 6 I will set my eyes **on them for good**, and **I will bring them back to this land**. I will build them up, and not tear them down; I will plant them, and not pluck them up. 7 **I will give them a heart to know me**, that I am the Lord, and they shall be my people and I will be their God, for they shall return to me with their whole heart"*

So in ALL THINGS, all the messy, mixed up, and misshapen pieces, God puts everything together for a greater purpose, which is our good.

*“No matter what our situation, our suffering, our persecution, **our own sinful failure**, our pain, our lack of faith --- in those things, as well as in ALL other THINGS, our heavenly Father **will work to produce our ultimate victory and blessing.**”¹*

But is this enough? He will do good for us according to His greater purposes, but do we have to merely wait for the future, or is He doing good now? What comfort can I take from what He is doing through suffering and all things in doing good currently?

Unshakable Purpose of God (29)

*29 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.***

Paul gives us two new words to wrestle with in light of the purpose of God in doing us good. We will define them and then connect them in verse 30. But in verse 29, Paul defines in large part what the **good** is that God is doing.

What does it mean that God ‘foreknew’ those that He predestined? There is admittedly tension in our human reasoning and logic to the idea of God foreknowing people and choosing people. Much like Eve in Genesis 3, we can easily question God’s goodness and His desire to actually do us good, and thus think that He alone does not have the ability to do it and needs our help. Or to put it another way, we perpetually do not like the fact that there is a God who is over us, powerful, who makes the rules, and we are merely those that are created by Him to respond TO Him in faith.

Foreknowledge here means simply to “*know beforehand*”. Some have argued that this means that God knew a person’s response to the gospel as He looked down the corridor of time, and THAT response dictated who God chose. While that appeals to my individual independent mind, it is simply not what the word means, nor the context demands, nor what the whole of Scripture teaches. In fact, **the word used for knowledge** here is typically used in **personal** ways (see Hosea 13:5; Ps. 144:3-11). This knowledge is not merely informational, but is personal. The word **foreknowledge** is used twice in the NT to mean “know beforehand” (Acts 26:5, 2 Pet. 3:17), and four times to mean “enter a relationship in advance” or “choose in advance” (Rom. 11:2; 1 Pet. 1:10; Acts 2:23; 1 Pet. 1:2).

It is those that God foreknew that He **predestined**, which means a choice that God made before we existed (Eph. 1:5) to place His covenant love on us. The word does NOT mean *precognition*, that He saw a response in the future, since all people were dead in their trespasses and sins (Eph. 2:1-3). As we have already seen in Romans, the only way someone can believe is by faith, and the only way faith can be possessed is through grace received (Eph. 2:8-9). We can say that, since God is the subject and actor of this section, that God *knows* those that He will *save*. **The faith God foresees is the faith HE creates!**² Let me try to illustrate this from the OT, as God chose Israel for His own glory and purposes, and did so out of a personal knowledge of them, far from their own goodness and choices:

¹ John MacArthur, “Romans New Testament Commentary”, p. 473.

² Daniel Doriani, “Romans: Reformed Expository Commentary”, p. 292.

Deuteronomy 7:6-8 *“For you are a people **holy** to the Lord your God. The Lord your God **has chosen you** to be a people for his **treasured possession**, out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth. 7 It was not because you were **more in number** than any other people that the **Lord set his love on you and chose you**, for you were **the fewest of all peoples**, 8 but it is because the **Lord loves you and is keeping the oath that he swore to your fathers**, that the Lord has brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the house of slavery, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt”*

Notice that God chose Israel NOT because of something they did or could offer --- they were the fewest from among all the nations --- nor that they turned out to be overly obedient or faithful. They were a **holy** people because HE SET THEM APART, choosing them to be a **treasured possession** --- *God literally made a wretch His treasure*. His decision to keep His covenant with Israel was NOT dependent on them, but on the fact that He chose to keep His promise. Notice the phrase **the LORD set His love on you and Chose you!** This is close to the language of Ephesians 1:5, where He predestined us in love. The point is this: the **choosing and knowing are both up to God**, not dependent on our actions! He did this in both Sovereign freedom and Sovereign grace, a free choice made by Him, for Him, through Him, and unto Him. And before we get caught up in the concept, Paul gives us clarity as to **why He does this and what it has to do with doing us good**:

TO BE CONFORMED TO THE IMAGE OF HIS SON –

This is the point, and this is the good. To be **conformed** is to be made in *like-nature or similar in form*. The goal of God knowing and choosing, and our ultimate good is to be like Jesus. This was the original nature of creation, back in Genesis 1-2: we were created to mirror and reflect the image of God in all creation, both in character and action (Gen. 1:26-28). But Adam failed, plunging us into the mire of sin and the clutches of death. But Jesus reversed the curse through His blood, taking the wrath of God on our behalf, so that we could be **conformed to Jesus through the transformation of the gospel in our lives**:

2 Corinthians 3:18 *“And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, **are being transformed** into the same image from one degree of glory to another. **For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit**”*

This is happening NOW in our lives through the work of God the Spirit in our lives and suffering that we endure. **What in the world is God doing through your cancer, your pain, your trial, your suffering, your being rejected, your waiting?** He is conforming you into the image of His Son. **Why is He not changing your circumstance, or your child, or your situation, and why is He allowing bad and wicked people to do things to you?** He is conforming you into the image of His Son. *Why is He not taking away the consequence, not relieving the distress, not removing the danger of the future?* He is conforming you into the image of His Son! Jesus knows us, intercedes for us (Rom. 34), and gave us an example to follow:

1 Peter 2:21-23 *“For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, **leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps**. 22 He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth. 23 When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but **continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly**.”*

But the work of *good* and *conformity* in us is NOT just about the now, but has eternity future in its view.

IN ORDER THAT HE MIGHT BE THE FIRSTBORN OF MANY BROTHERS –

Jesus succeeded where Adam failed. Being conformed to Jesus is not even the final purpose in God doing us good, but there is a future part of the good --- that we will be with Jesus, ruling with Him, with Him being **firstborn of many**. This idea signals the fact that Jesus fulfilled the promise of the Abrahamic covenant, that we come to God's family only through Him, and that we are created to rule the world under His Lordship. But Jesus being **firstborn ultimately signals HIS PREEMINENCE over all things**. God is preparing *good in us* now and will do *good for us* in the future.

1 John 3:2 *"Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when **he appears we shall be like him**, because we shall see him as he is"*

Philippians 3:20-21 *"But our citizenship is in heaven, and **from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, 21 who will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body**, by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself."*

Are you asking "why" this morning? The answer is there, but it sure is not easy. The winds can blow hard against our lives, and the soil around us can feel all kinds of unstable. But God wants us to **know why**, and gives us security in knowing that our salvation is so sure BECAUSE OF HIS UNSHAKABLE PURPOSE AND POWER, that we can rest in Him while we wait. He is doing good in us and for us. There is a reason for it, but we have to believe. It is why he bookends this section with glory (v. 23, 30), so that we will continue to look forward. But we also need to know what He has done IN OUR SALVATION, a look at the way the foundation actually works, to assure us that it will never be taken away. That is the wonder of the glorious **hope that we have in Christ**. That is what we will look at in particular next week.

Unbreakable Power of God (30)

And those whom he **predestined** he also **called**, and those whom he **called** he also **justified**, and those whom he **justified** he also **glorified**.