



THE FIRST WORD

FROM FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF BONITA SPRINGS

THE REASON FOR EVERYTHING

SERMON BY REV. STEVE CLARK ■ AUGUST 20, 2023

What if I were to tell you that I knew the reason for everything that has happened in your life? I know it sounds a little presumptuous, but according to the diploma hanging in my office, I am a *Master of Divinity*. That's got to count for something, right? So humor me for a second; I know the reason for everything that happens in your life. The reason you didn't get the job you wanted 20 years ago and got a different one instead; the reason things didn't work out with that high school girlfriend; the reason you keep having the recurring dream that you're riding a bicycle but hit a steep ramp and suddenly start to fall backward and get a weird weightless feeling and wake up with a start. Yep! Even the reason for that. Do you want to know? Of course, you want to know!

Many in this room have a gut feeling that there's a purpose for what happens to us. This is often true whether you are a Christian or even religious. We tend to believe there is a reason behind what happens to us, that there is some plan or direction behind it all. Some call it fate. Some say we are connected through energy in the universe that balances things out; some, like me and many others at this church, believe in a God who has a will behind everything that happens. Whatever it's called, many believe that there is a reason! It gives us hope when things are hard and peace when things are confusing. I'm going to tell you what the reason is, or rather, the Apostle Paul is. The Apostle Paul writes about this idea in Romans 8:28-30. Let's look at this passage, from the English Standard Version:

And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose. ²⁹For 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. ³⁰And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified.

Now let's unpack the reason for everything. That is an ambitious task in a 25-minute sermon so bear with me. When researching for this sermon I found other pastors who took five sermons, each forty minutes long, to cover this same passage. You can thank me later! However, that means I'll leave some questions on the table. We won't spend a great deal of time trying to solve quandaries about predestination. I know you were really hoping for that and I'm sorry. I really want to focus on just one question: What is the reason for the good, the bad, and the ugly things that happen in our lives?

If you have been a Christian for some time, odds are high that you've come across the popular first verse we read in Romans 8:28, on a coffee mug, a bumper sticker, or an Instagram post. "God works all things for good for those who love him." And that's usually where the post ends. Here's the problem: those quotes end in the middle of the sentence! There's a whole second half to verse 28. When you stop in the middle of a sentence you usually miss the full meaning. Let's say that the aforementioned high school girlfriend wants to gently break up with her boy-friend. She starts her sentence with, "Hey, I want you to know, Billy, I care a lot about you..." Billy says, "Wow, that's so nice! Thanks!" and promptly leaves. Oh no! Billy completely misunderstood. That's an exegetical fallacy, Billy! To get the full meaning of something, we need the full sentence. So, here's the full sentence of Romans 8:28: *"And we know that for those who love God, all things work together for good, for those who are called according to His purpose."*

That's an important addition. If we cut the sentence off in the middle—after the word “good”—we define what *we* think good is. We usually mean, “God works everything together for what *I* think is good for *me*.” We say, “Oh, I didn’t get the job I wanted...but God works for good. Maybe instead I’ll get a promotion at my current job”; or “Oh, I didn’t get the house I wanted. But God works for good. I bet the market will go down and in three years I’ll get an even bigger house”; or “Oh, I didn’t get the health I wanted. But God works for good so He must have an even bigger blessing in store.”

There’s a problem with this approach: We don’t always know what’s good for us! Our gut intuition, what we think is good for us, is often inaccurate. When I was a kid, my dad kept some papaya-flavored chewable antacid tablets around the house. Whenever I had an upset tummy I took one of these papaya tablets. It helped that I thought they were delicious. One day I was feeling particularly sick and figured, “Hey, it’s medicine—that’s good for me, right?” So, I chowed down on about nine of those papaya tablets. A few hours later eight-year-old Steve felt so sick he was convinced he was going to die! (Don’t worry. I was perfectly fine after one very unpleasant evening curled up on the couch.) Later when I learned how medicine works I understood why you can’t pump a dozen antacids into an eight-year-old if you still want his digestive system to function. At the time I didn’t know what was good for me and what I thought was good for me sure wasn’t. But I’m not the only one. Some of you have probably had your youngsters throw a tantrum when you wouldn’t let them do something that would have been bad for them, like playing in the street or eating a battery. And this tendency doesn’t go away when we become adults, does it? We might be so convinced a certain job, a move, a relationship, or a life change is good for us... only to be filled with regret after a few years’ perspective. It turns out that we don’t always know what’s good for us.

Because of that, our definition of “good” doesn’t always match God’s definition of “good.” So, how does God define “good”? According to Romans 8:28, God defines good “according to His purpose.”

Paul writes, “...all things work... for good... for those who [love God] according to his purpose.” What is His purpose? Romans 8:29 tells us God’s purpose: “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.”

You might be thinking, “Great, that clears everything up.” What does that mean? I don’t know about you, but I rarely use words like foreknew, predestined, or conformed in everyday conversation. We’ll talk about those words a bit more later but for now, let’s just reword this verse in a way that makes more sense to us. Here is God’s purpose in the Revised Steve Version: “Since the beginning of time, God’s purpose for your life is to make you more like Jesus.” That’s what God means by “good.” That’s the reason for everything that happens to you and that’s the main idea from the text today. God’s plan for everything that happens to you is to make you more like Jesus.

If you’re here this morning and you’re on the fence about faith, you might be thinking, “Hold on a second, I didn’t sign up for this. I don’t know if I even like Jesus. I definitely don’t want to be like Jesus. Take my name off the mailing list.” Note that Romans 8:28 says that “all things work together for good for those who love God.” In other words, this reason for everything only applies to those who are believers, followers, and lovers of God. He won’t force you to become like Jesus. But if you are a follower of Jesus, God’s purpose for everything in your life is to make you more like Jesus. Then again, even if you are a follower of Jesus are you interested? Do you want that? Or do you find yourself thinking, if only God’s purpose were to make me more like Tom Hanks or Brad Rogers! But...Jesus?

I seem to be on an audience participation kick lately, so let’s try a group exercise. I want you to think about Jesus. What is the first word that comes to your mind if you were to describe Him? Think of everything you know about Him, Bible stories about Him, whatever. Now, turn to your neighbor and tell your neighbor what word came

to mind to describe Jesus. What comes to mind? Loving? Kind? Gentle? Holy? Angry? Boring? Controversial?

Sometimes, I wonder if Renaissance art shapes our image of Jesus more than the Bible does. Think about it, what do you think Jesus was like? You might imagine Him as someone who talked a lot, didn't swear, and read His Bible every day. He was probably a straight-A student in school, pretty bad at cards, and definitely not a great dancer. I think a lot of our intuitions would be wrong. Just look at the beginning of the Gospel of John. What was the very first miracle Jesus performed? He discovered that a wedding celebration was out of wine and responded by making 120 gallons of fantastic wine. That's not a boring wedding guest! That guy was fun! Let's invite Him to the church potluck! When we read the Gospel with unbiased eyes, stories tell us that Jesus was funny, witty, stuck to His values, took naps on boats, and changed countless lives for the better. Becoming like Jesus would make us the most holistic people we could be. I've heard it said that the best question we can ask ourselves as Christians is, "What would Jesus do if He were me?" If Jesus were a 21st-century retiree, high school student, or realtor—what would His day-to-day be like? How would He conduct His business or relationships? That's the essential question of what it means to follow Jesus. Paul says God uses all the good and bad things in your life to make you more like Him; that's good news. But it doesn't stop there.

Paul uses a fancy word—the word the ESV translates as “conformed” and that I translate as “make more like.” It's the Greek word *summorphos*. You can see in it the English word *morph*. To “morph” is to change form—like a caterpillar into a butterfly. In some ways, we see this “formation” as work in an apprentice relationship. For example, if you ever apprenticed as a roofer, a plumber, or a construction worker, or you interned at a business and shadowed an expert in your field you learned how to do what they do—their form. The more time you spent with them, the more you became like them. The same is true in our relationship with Jesus but on a far deeper level. The Bible talks not just about our resembling Jesus but sharing

in everything Jesus experiences. Paul really likes to throw the “sum” prefix onto words when he’s talking about a Christian’s relationship with Jesus. It’s a prefix that means “with” or “together.” In other places, for example, he says that through our relationship with Jesus we are “crucified” with Christ, “buried” with Christ or “made alive” together with Christ. To be *sum-morphos* with Christ is to be literally *formed* with him; the word means “to have the same form as another.” When Paul says at the end of Romans 8:30 that we will be glorified with Christ, he’s saying that everything God does is toward this end purpose. We will be made glorious like Jesus, co-reigning together in all eternity. That’s pretty cool! More on that later.

According to Paul, becoming more like Jesus is the reason for everything. Why did you not get that job 20 years ago? So that God could make you more like Jesus. Why did you have three kids instead of two? So that God could make you more like Jesus. Why do you keep having that recurring nightmare about the bicycle? Well, I don’t know how it works but somehow the Bible claims that even the recurring nightmare about the bicycle is making you more like Jesus. That’s the reason for everything.

It does, however, bring up the second of our two questions of the day. We just answered our first question: What is the reason for everything? Our next question: Does that include the bad things? We might wonder, what about the really, really bad things? Does that mean God works a broken marriage to make me more like Jesus? Can God work a consuming addiction, a loss or trauma, or deep suffering to make me more like Jesus? What about the Maui wildfires that are tearing Hawaii apart? Does God use those things to make people more like Jesus?

The Roman Christians were probably asking the same questions. Paul wrote this letter around 57 AD to the church in Rome. A few years before, the Jewish Christians had been kicked out of Rome by emperor Claudius and had just returned. Not only had they lost their homes, but there was great division and strife between the Jew-

ish Christians and the Gentile Christians as the non-Jews didn't hold the same values. On top of that, Rome was now being ruled by a guy named Nero. You may have heard of him. Among other things, Nero's reputation included murder, the assassination of loved ones, and general moral depravity. Modern scholars are a bit divided about how much of Nero's story is legend and how much is truth, but church tradition holds that when the great fire of Rome erupted in 64 AD—a short seven years after Paul wrote his letter—Nero set the blame for it on the Roman Christians, catalyzing a massive persecution of Christians. All those famous old stories about Christians being fed to lions and brutally martyred for their faith have their origin in Rome. The very church to which Paul wrote saying, "God works all things for good." In fact, church tradition holds that Paul himself would be killed in Rome under Nero's reign, beheaded for his faith in the very city to which he wrote, "God works all things for good." Do you think Paul still believed that eight years later?

I think he did, and here's why. Romans 8 is all about suffering. In fact in verse 17, which introduces the section we are studying today, Paul writes that "*[we are] fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may be glorified with him.*" That word "glory" might sound familiar. We mentioned it earlier.

The idea of glory is usually tied to Jesus' suffering, death, and resurrection. When Jesus is glorified, the Bible speaks of His being resurrected with a new, powerful body, ascending into heaven at the right hand of God, and reigning forever over creation for all eternity. And Paul says if we suffer with Him, we will share in that same glory with Him. Heaven isn't playing a harp on a cloud forever—it's co-ruling the universe with the eternal Jesus. In other words, everything that happens on earth, from the Maui wildfires to your nightmare about the bicycle, is working toward the end purpose of making you eternally like Jesus. That doesn't mean God wants trauma for us, but that He uses evil that happens in our lives and creates good from it. Joni Eareckson Tada, a Christian author who became a quadriplegic from a diving accident, famously said, "God sometimes uses what

He hates to accomplish what He loves.” Such was the case for the Cross. Such was the case for the suffering Romans. Such is the case for us. Becoming like Jesus in this world is just the beginning. Paul shows us why we can be certain of this truth in verse 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.”*

I promised we’d talk about the scary “predestination” word for just a bit. “Predestination” is Bible-speak for “something God planned ahead of time.” Paul said that God knew you from the beginning of time, and if you’re a follower of Jesus, God chose that you would believe in Him. This leads to all sorts of big theological questions and debates. If God planned for me to believe in Jesus, am I just a robot with no choice? If God chooses who believes in Jesus, how can we be held responsible for our own actions? These are all great questions. I won’t resolve them today. There are some resources and great answers available to help us understand this dilemma a bit better, and I’d love for you to come to my office and ask your questions. If I don’t know the answer, I’ll just send you across the hallway to Pastor Steven Grant. But the very best response I ever heard to predestination questions was from my dad, whom I asked about it when I was eight years old. Maybe I was thinking a bit eternally after my bout with the papaya tablets. My dad said, “Steve, the Bible tells us that God is in control of everything. The Bible also tells us we are responsible for our own actions. Then the Bible shuts up and walks away.” In other words, it doesn’t answer all our questions!

But what I will say about predestination is that Paul only uses it to encourage his readers. He uses it to tell readers, “This is the plan of God. It can’t be stopped and it doesn’t depend on you.” Paul doesn’t use predestination to scare readers or to make them wonder whether they’re saved, he uses it to say, “Look, God is the one who has *saved* you. It doesn’t depend on you, no matter how much you mess up.”

Theologians who are smarter than I am like to call this passage “The Golden Chain” because there are a series of unbreakable links. One

thing makes the other thing true. Remember back in 10th grade when you learned geometry proofs? “If $a = b$, and $b = c$, then $a = c$, due to the transitive property of equality?” I’m sure if you stayed awake for predestination, the transitive property of equality just knocked you out. Romans 8 is the geometry proof of the New Testament. Follow Paul’s reasoning: We know that God works all things for good—to make you more like Jesus. Why? Because His purpose can’t be stopped. Why? Because He predestined it. He chose it. And if He predestined it, then those He calls are going to be justified—forgiven of sin. And those who are justified are going to be glorified. You can’t fall out of the chain. There’s nothing you can do about it. If you love God, He will make you more like Jesus. He’s heaven-bent on it. It doesn’t depend on you.

And yes, this includes the bad things. There’s one other place in scripture where Paul uses that word we talked about earlier, *summorphos*. It’s in Philippians 3:10-11 where Paul says he counts everything as loss for the sake of knowing Jesus,

...that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, ¹¹that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead.

Paul knew that Jesus had suffered. Jesus was the greatest human who ever lived and perhaps suffered more than anyone who ever lived. Yet he said that our suffering, our worst moments, make us more like Jesus too.

You might say, “I don’t feel particularly like Jesus.” Maybe you’ve watched others follow Jesus for their whole lives and maybe they don’t seem to be more like Jesus—Uncle Jimbo only got crankier and more crotchety the older he got. But God doesn’t just have life on earth in mind. Way back in the beginning of the Bible in Genesis 1:26 God declared a plan: “*Let us make man in our image.*” God intended to make us like Him. Our sin and brokenness got in the way. We are decidedly very un-Godlike right now, and we usually are the most

aware of that. We're aware of our weaknesses, shortcomings, and failures. But in the New Testament, 2 Corinthians 4 tells us that Jesus is the perfect image of God. And Romans 8 tells us God is making us like Jesus. Remember the transitive property of equality? God's eternal purpose for everything that happens to you—even the bad things—is to make you the type of person you were meant to be before the world fell apart. Romans 8 tells us that God is so heaven-bent on your be-coming like Jesus that you can't stop it, no matter how many times you mess up. God's reason for everything that happens in your life isn't just to make your life better in five years. It's not just to get you a better car or a nicer home or a longer life. And it's not even just to make you more like Jesus on earth. God's reason for everything is to remake your soul eternally in the image of His Son, Jesus, and to co-rule the new heaven and earth for all eternity with Him, free of sin, free of pain, free of suffering, redeemed, and renewed. His reason for everything is to make you more like Jesus, and one day you will be.

Last summer, my wife and I visited a glassblowing studio in Vermont. I don't know if you're familiar with the process of glassblowing, but essentially, the glassblower subjects the glass to unimaginable heat—up to thousands of degrees—in a forge so that it can be gradually shaped, formed, and molded into something without shattering. Only when glass is heated does it be-come pliable and moldable in the hands of the glassmaker. The heat of the forge is like suffering and suffering is what ends up shaping and forming us. All the bad things that happen, the hard things that happen are part of what makes us moldable and form-able to become more like Jesus—not just on earth, but for all eternity.

What does that mean for us today? How can it affect our lives right now? Here are some takeaways for us:

- 1) **A new perspective on present suffering.** This concept is why Paul can say in Romans 8:18, *"I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us."*

When we think about there being a “reason for everything” we usually think about it in terms of our life on earth. But if you believe that you’ll spend eternity co-ruling the universe with Jesus, what if the reason for what happens now is not just for your life on earth but is also part of shaping you toward God’s eternal destiny for you—a destiny that is more sure and solid than a concrete-poured building in a storm?

- 2) **A new approach to present challenges.** If God’s ultimate purpose is to make you more like Jesus, how does that change the way you approach something bad that happens to you? If you don’t get the job, what if the reason isn’t some-thing like, “Oh, God will provide another job for me.” What if it is “God is making me more like Jesus?” More patient, more kind, more dependent on Him? That might make your first reaction to a challenge prayer instead of panic. It might make your first reaction to fight patience instead of pride.
- 3) **A new peace because of future confidence.** I’m an Atlanta Braves fan and they’ve been having a lot of comeback wins lately. When I’m watching live, I’m a nervous wreck. “Are they gonna do it? They’re down by 3!” But if I know they won the game and I’m watching a replay, I’m just filled with smug confidence. I know they won, I just wonder who gets the big hit that pulls it out. That’s what it’s like to go through life as a believer in this promise. You know in the end that God’s goal is to make you more like Jesus—now on earth and in eternity as you dwell in eternal peace and joy alongside Him. The question is no longer if God will do good for you. It’s how. How is He going to do it? What’s it going to be like? How is He going to use what’s happening right now to help morph you into the eternal image of His beloved Son?

That is the question today for which you get to discover the answer. Now we know what the reason is for everything in your life. It is to make you more like Jesus. You get to go find out how! ■



FIRST
PRESBYTERIAN
CHURCH

BONITA SPRINGS

9751 Bonita Beach Road | Bonita Springs, Florida 34135 | 239 992 3233 | fpcbonita.org