

THE LETTER THAT CHANGED THE WORLD - The Biblical Theology of Romans - Part twenty-one
Sunday, March 24th, 2019 - 6:00 p.m. - Teaching #2117
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BIBLICAL CONFIDENCE - WHAT WE NEVER KNOW AND WHAT WE CAN KNOW FOR CERTAIN

Romans 8:26-30 - “Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words. [27] And he who searches hearts knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will 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. [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. [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.”

It is hard to miss the contrasting conditions laid out in this text. Particularly, we are meant to compare two conditions of **knowing** or **knowledge**. **Verses 26-27** (picking up the train of thought from **24-25**) focus on what we **don't** and **can't** know - “Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought....”(8:28a). Because we are still waiting for the end of the story - the completion of our salvation - and because we are bound to a “**futile**” creation (**20**), we don't always know how to best react to every trial.

This makes the life of faith difficult. We pray, at times, in the dark. Waiting causes **weariness**, but it also causes **confusion**. How high are we to set our expectations? What is God up to in the specifics of our situation? He doesn't always tell us everything right away. So, long story short, “....we don't know what to pray for as we ought....”(8:26). When Paul says we don't know what to pray for “**as we ought**”(26), he means we don't know as we **would** know if we only had to factor **God** and not **sin, the Fall, and creation's futility** into the situation. We can't presently see all the unfolding of God's grand future plan for our lives.

But then, in **verse 28** the tone changes. Paul begins a long series of wonderful declarations based exclusively on what we **do** know for sure - “**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 that weren't enough, he strikes the same theme of **knowing and certainty** in **verse 38** - “**For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers....can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus**”(8:38 & 39b).

So these two conditions form the framework of tonight's study. There are things we **don't know** fully yet. We mustn't pretend we **do** know them because God has a wonderful purpose and provision for those who **admit** they don't know them. Then, there are things we **do know** for certain. These things we must rehearse and relearn. We must proclaim them to ourselves repeatedly because they become our strength and portion.

1) **OUR PRESENT CONDITION IS DESCRIBED AS A CONDITION OF WEAKNESS - AND IT EFFECTS OUR PRAYING**

Romans 8:26 - “Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words.”

We are weak because we must endure the pain of **waiting** along with the rest of the fallen creation - **8:19, 24-25** - “**For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God....24-25....For in this hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what he sees? [25] But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.**”

But there's more. Not only do we have to wait, but we don't even **fully** know what it is we're waiting **for**. True, we're given **some** details, but no where near all. John makes it clear that we don't even know fully right now what we're all going to become when Jesus comes again - **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.**”

We know enough to give us great hope. We know we'll be just like Jesus in His glorified state. But we've not **seen** Jesus in that condition. We **picture** all sorts of things, but picturing isn't **knowing**. Like the song used to say, we can only **imagine**.

And this effects our praying. It creates a certain ignorance. Because we don't know exactly how God is shaping our lives - because we don't know **exactly** what shape the clay vessel of our lives is to take - we don't know how to pray.

Do we pray for deliverance? What if God is *using* the trial or the darkness to make us into what we're destined to become? Should we just hunker down and quietly endure? What about "You have not because you ask not."? Clearly, we need help in our praying. And God has thought of that already:

2) THE HOLY SPIRIT IS GIVEN TO HELP US INTERNALLY WITH OUR WEAKNESS ON PRAYER

Romans 8:26-27 - "Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words. [27] And he who searches hearts knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God."

The striking thing about these verses is the description of the *kind* of help we get from the Holy Spirit. Given the problem of our *ignorance* one would expect the Holy Spirit to give us *information*. We *don't* know how we ought to pray. So the Holy Spirit should come and fill us in. This would only make sense. But that's *not* what the Holy Spirit does, according to this text.

The Holy Spirit comes and *groans* within us. Mark that down. It's the Holy Spirit who does the groaning in these verses - "*...the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words*"(26). He doesn't answer all our questions. True, there are *gifts of the Spirit* given to bring supernatural knowledge of specific events (1 **Corinthians 12:8**), but Paul isn't dealing with those gifts of the Spirit here. He's describing the general work of the Spirit in *all* God's redeemed, adopted children.

The Holy Spirit *helps us wait with patience* (8:25 - "But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience."). He assures us, just when our own ignorance and weakness might cause us to doubt God cares at all, that we are still God's children, that the waiting, while hard, is not the end of the story, and that He is with us - right in the middle of all our weakness.

"And he who searches hearts knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God"(27). The Spirit knows the whole plan of the Father for us even when we don't. He is able to keep us linked up with God as our Father (remember **8:16** - "The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are *children of God*...") even when, in our weakness, we can't trace God's hand. This leads Paul into his specific description of the kind of help the Holy Spirit births deep within our groaning souls:

3) THE HOLY SPIRIT SHIFTS OUR ATTENTION FROM OUR OWN WEAKNESS AND IGNORANCE TO GOD'S POWER AND ETERNAL PLAN

Romans 8:28-30 - "*And we know* that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose. [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. [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."

Here Paul begins unpacking, not what we *don't* know, but what we *do*. The Holy Spirit doesn't take away our weakness in the sense of removing all the questions. He doesn't come and explain all the riddles of this groaning creation. But He *does* help us focus our hearts on what we *do* know for sure.

The focus here is all on Father God's saving work in Christ Jesus. **Verse 30** describes some aspects of God's work properly in the *past tense*. We were foreknown and predestined and called and justified. Other portions are actually still in the *future*. But even future glorification is described in the *present tense* rather than the *future*.

The point is surely that *present* and *future* don't stand in sharp contrast when God is at work. In terms of any *external force or power* there is nothing whatsoever that can make the accomplishment of God's *future* work any less certain than those which have already been completed in the *past*. Salvation, in the divine perspective, is a *seamless* event.

Paul's intention seems to be to make us more deeply aware - even in our times of weakness, when we don't even know how to pray - that God, unlike us, is never in the dark. His saving work is all of one piece. He will finish what He starts.

This is the key to understanding the promise 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." Viewing God's *whole*

plan will keep us from making the mistake of judging God by **isolated events**.

This text doesn't say only good things will happen to us. No. Bad things happen. They are a regular expression of the **futility** of fallen creation. **But they are never in control of our destiny**. God works everything **together** for our good. And He does this because He does everything with the whole scope of redeeming grace in mind.

Verse 29 fills the sandwich between **28** and **30**. Paul takes the time to delineate the **kind of good** God builds into our lives in this challenging world. **Verse 29** defines the "good" mentioned in **verse 28** - **"....all things work together for good...."** God's ultimate work in our lives is not to produce our **comfort** or our **pleasure**. His ultimate work is not our **laughter** or our **leisure**. God ultimate goal is not our **health** or our **prosperity**.

Certainly, in their proper place, there is nothing **wrong** with any of these things. God is free to bring them into my life as His wisdom designs. But to the extent that I think these are Father God's **primary** concern for my life I will find His ways confusing at best and irritating at worst. His primary plan - the plan which Paul says spans the ages from eternity past into future glory still to be revealed - is to make my character just like that of Jesus.

That's why Paul closes off **verse 29** with that striking description of Jesus as the **"first-born among many brothers."** God's goal isn't just to bring Jesus Christ into glory alone. He is after more than He had in the inner life of the Trinity before time began:

Colossians 1:15-20 - "He is the image of the invisible God, the **firstborn of all creation**. [16] For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. [17] And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together. [18] And he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent. [19] For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, [20] and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross."

Revelation 1:4-6 - "John to the seven churches that are in Asia: Grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come, and from the seven spirits who are before his throne, [5] and from Jesus Christ the faithful witness, **the firstborn of the dead**, and the ruler of kings on earth. To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood [6] and made us a kingdom, priests to his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.

If my parents told you that Paul Horban was their **firstborn** son they mean for you to understand they had other children. That's the idea here in these texts. Father God is out to usher you and me into that same holy presence where His **firstborn** presently is. And He works everything in this earthly life to bring about our **family resemblance** with our risen, reigning Lord.