

In this third study on providence we are going to look at what is probably the most familiar and precious verse on God's providence - Romans 8:28.

It is important to put this verse in its context. Paul is expressing his confidence that none of our present sufferings, as we live out our lives in mortal bodies within a decaying world affected by sin, can hinder God's plan.

It is important to be clear about what the "good" is that God is working for in every aspect of our life. This is defined in verses 29-30 - his great and certain plan to conform us to the likeness of his Son, and ultimately to glorify us.

"Foreknew" means far more than just God sees into the future. It is a term describing the fact that God has initiated our relationship with him - and he did that before the creation of the world (see Ephesians 1). This is made even more certain by the fact that, if he has done that, we can be said to already be "glorified" (vs 30) - the past tense is used to underline that if God has acted, it is as if it has already happened, even if from our perspective we are waiting for it.

In vs 31-39 Paul underlines the fact we can have confidence that God will keep us, no matter what. We can trust him because we can look back to the cross (vs 32). The argument is from the greater to the lesser. If God has given up his Son for us, there is no way he will not do everything to keep us. In vs 33 he turns our attention to the last day. We may fear that charges may be brought against us that will show us to be guilty in God's sight - but God has already justified us in Christ. Jesus is right now interceding for us in heaven (vs 34).

In vs 35 Paul lists a number of things which can threaten believers right now, especially those facing persecution. He is very realistic. Difficulties will come. He quotes Psalm 44 to show that God's people have always suffered unjustly, and always will, but God has always showed himself to be faithful.

In the closing verses Paul considers all possible threats and his conclusion is clear - nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ. This is not simply an emotional statement - if we are always connected to God's love in Christ, we are justified and will be glorified. Knowing this is to trust in God's providential rule for us through every difficulty in life.

POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

What things can lead us to doubt God's promise to take us to heaven?

Just scan vs 17-27. What should be our expectations concerning the present?

The issue in this study is: how can we know for certain that the future God has promised will actually materialise. What encouragement does vs 28 give us?

What the "good" God is working things together for? How does this affect how we think about everything we may have to go through?

How do we know that God's plan will succeed? How does vs 29-30 emphasise this certainty?

How does this comfort us when we are going through suffering in the present?

"If God is for us, who can be against us?" How do we know God is for us?

What kind of opposition does Paul suggest, in vs 33-34, we may fear? On what basis can we stand up to these fears?

In vs 35 Paul names some potential enemies. Which ones are real for us now and how do they manifest themselves? How do we suspect they may manifest themselves in the future?

Why is vs 36 an answer to these enemies? Can they ultimately do us harm?

In all this, what does Paul teach us about having a correct perspective in the face of suffering? What will happen if we look at ourselves and at our present circumstances? What will happen if we look to God and to the future?

(Much of this is adapted from “Read Mark Learn Romans” by St Helen’s, Bishopsgate)