

+ 10th Sunday After Pentecost: August 9, 2020 +
St Paul Lutheran, Tomah, Wisconsin
Pastor Korey Van Kampen
"God's Solution to Stress"

Has life got you stressed out? The last few months have seen many aspects of our life tossed up into the air. It has elevated fears of sickness and death and made those things more real to many people, which has also, along with constantly changing rules assaulted our sense of comfort and control of our lives. Toss on top of it concerns about our national and local economy as a whole or about your own gainful employment. Add to that uncertainty about school for our kids and grandkids and the impact that will have on them and their families. Then, together with that, many times we have to make hard decisions in our various callings in life that we know aren't going to please everyone, and we have to make them often. Put it all together and it's no wonder that, as a society, we're all stressed out. Often the biggest cause of stress is uncertainty -- we just don't know how a situation will play out. It could go this way or that way or some other way altogether and the outcome might not be pleasant or desirable. If you've ever felt that way, I have good news for you. In today's section of Romans, we're given God's solution to our stress and uncertainty.

Romans 8:28-30 We know that all things work together for the good of those who love God, for those who are called according to his purpose, ²⁹ because those God foreknew, he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, so that he would be the firstborn among many brothers. ³⁰ And those he predestined, he also called. Those he called, he also justified. And those he justified, he also glorified

Romans 8 has addressed how the Christian deals with difficulty. We look ahead to our coming glory. We pray with the Spirit's help. Now, we're told to trust God's plan for you. Paul makes this point with a simple declaration. **We know that all things work together for the good of those who love God, for those who are called according to his purpose.** Let's unpack this promise by phrase. 'All things.' That means everything in life. Prosperity and poverty, tragedy and triumph, joy and grief, things pleasant and painful, the easy and the challenging, and everything in between. The whole realm of your life experience. All of it, Paul says, 'works together.' That is, all the things of life cooperate toward a common goal. And what is that common goal?

It's your good. All things work together for good. Now, this is the phrase that needs the most explanation. What does Paul mean by 'good'? To understand it, let's think of life from the biggest picture view possible. What is the greatest good that can happen to a person? Isn't it to know God and live forever with him? That's the good that is promised here. He's not talking about present life circumstances. This is not a promise that if you lose your job, you'll get a better one in a couple months with more pay and less stress. It's not a promise that if your boyfriend breaks up with you, there will be someone better looking, or nicer, or more successful waiting for you around the corner or anything like that. But what is promising you is that everything that happens in your life serves a greater purpose -- to bring you closer to God and to life forever with him. So, this promise means that whatever it is that is stressing you out, whatever kind of uncertainty you're dealing with, while the situation may go one way or the other, the end result is the same, God will use whatever it is to bring you closer to him.

Now, the challenge is believing this, right? Believing it to the point where we actually begin to let go of the things that worry us. So how can we know that God's really got it all under control and using everything for good? Perhaps the strongest way we see this truth working out in time and history is in the life and death of Jesus. I don't know that there is a greater indictment on humanity than the death of Jesus. Consider all the factors that contributed to it: Jealousy on the part of the religious leaders. Injustice in the legal system that would allow an innocent person to be executed. Political expediency on the part of Pilate -- appeasing a mob to protect his position and career. Fear in the disciples led to their abandoning him. And all this in addition to the physical and spiritual suffering that he endured. But what did God work through this injustice, jealousy, expedience, fear, and suffering? He delivered the world from sin and death. Not only that, he broke the power of death by raising Jesus from the dead. And on the basis of what happened to Jesus, we are declared righteous, our sins are sent away forever and we're welcomed into his family forever. All through one of the most heinous events top to bottom in human history. So what does this tell us? Our God has the power, the foresight, the control to use even the worst evil to bring about the greatest good. And if he can do it on such a grand scale as to save the world from sin and death, then can't he also work in your life and mine?

That's exactly what Paul wants us to see next. He invites you and me to see God's working in your life beginning in the quiet recesses of eternity in the past and then forward into the boundless future. Look at this chain of your salvation. **For those God foreknew he also predestined...And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified.** The first link in the chain is foreknowledge. God foreknew you. This means that before you were born, he knew you. And his knowing you isn't just a matter of knowing your name, no, it means that he set his love upon you ahead of time. Then the next link: **Those he foreknew he also predestined.** He predestined you. To predestine is to set a path ahead of time, to line up its future. So, God has had your eternal destination laid out for you in advance of all time and history. Now, a challenge that we can sometimes have with this concept is we import into it questions and understandings that the concept isn't meant to answer. To keep clear from that, focus on what Paul says rather than what he doesn't say, and we can find great comfort in this truth. Paul is telling the Christian -- he's telling you, "God knew you and loved you before the world began. In that love, he set you on a path to be with him forever." What he wants you to know that in his eyes, your faith and life are not an accident. God is not stuck with you. No, he chose you. He wanted you to be with him.

The chain continues: **Those he predestined he also called.** Now the chain moves from eternity to the events in your life. He's the one who saw it that at some point in your life, whether as a child or adult, you heard about Jesus Christ, and not only that, but that you also believed in him. Then the next link: **Those he called he also justified.** To be justified is to be declared not guilty of wrongdoing in a court. In a divine sense, to be justified is to be declared not guilty of any sin by God himself. On the basis of Jesus' perfect life, his suffering and death, and his resurrection, God took away all your sin, all your misdeeds, and he declares you to be without sin and acceptable in his sight. All this happens by faith. And then comes the final link: **Those he justified, he also glorified.** This one is perhaps the most interesting. Paul has talked about coming glory. But here he uses the past tense: glorified. Now, why would he speak that way? Two reasons. First, this coming glory is

already the possession of those whom God foreknew, predestined, called, and justified. That glory already belongs to you. So in that sense, you are glorified, even though you're not showing the fullness of it yet. And secondly, this future glory is so fixed and so certain and so solid that Paul can speak of it as an accomplished fact even though it has yet to happen. That's how certain God's promises are.

So let's put this all together. God has been directing all the events in all of history, from one end of time to the other, and along with that, all the events of your life with one goal -- you being in glory with him forever. So think about how he's been working in your life. What are the events in your life that brought you here today? Maybe you're here because of a spouse or a friend -- ok, now think about how you came to meet that person. Were there some chance circumstances at play? Being in the right place at the right time? Or even if you're here because you were born into a Christian home, what brought about your family's Christianity? It might be an interesting thing to trace back into history if your roots go back a ways. Or maybe I can make this a little more real for you. I'm a pastor here because I went to our church body's college and seminary. I can say that I probably would not have gone to that college and seminary had I not been sent to Luther Prep in Watertown. And I can say that as a Texas kid, I wasn't thrilled at the idea of going away to school in Wisconsin where I knew no one. My parents would not have sent me to that school if we didn't attend the church we did at the time, because the pastor there, someone I think many of you know of, Pastor Paul Prange, really encouraged my parents to give it a shot. We probably would not have been in that church unless my parents had sought out a different school while living in Phoenix when I was young -- they found a Lutheran school. So what caused my parents to seek out a different school? I was very young at the time, but I believe it had something to do with a sex education policy that the district was planning to introduce at the elementary level. So, in a sense, I'm here today because of a school district's sex education policy.

So then, if, even through my short time here, you've been blessed by God through my preaching and teaching and ministry, that policy was written for you. **All things** (even school sex-ed policies) **work together for good for those who love God.** So then, if you find yourself worrying about something, stressing about all the uncertainties of life, here's what you can do. Take yourself back to what God has done for you. He has set his love on you from all eternity. He sent his Son to live perfectly, to die in your place, and rise again. He set you on your path of life, arranged its events, and guided your steps so that you would hear about this Savior and believe in him. In this same way, God is working all things in your life for your ultimate good. Does this mean that we always make the best choices? No. Does it mean that we never say or do things we regret? Of course not. But our God is so great that he uses not just our good choices, but also our bad ones; not just our triumphs, but also our failures, all to bring us closer to him.

That means that however the situations you're dealing with turn out, it will be OK. In fact, infinitely better than OK. We know that because if God has arranged and ordered all of history to bring about Jesus and his salvation, and used all things in your life to bring you here with the ultimate goal of your eternal life, can he not also use that situation as a step in his plan for you or for someone else? Of course he can, and of course he will. So you don't need to worry and lose sleep over all the things that we don't have control over. God's got it, and he's got you. You are chosen by God and dearly loved. He gave up his son for you. He will use everything for your good. AMEN!