

“Saved for a Purpose”
Romans 8:28-30

Tommy, thank you very much for giving me the opportunity to speak today. It was the last Sunday in August three years ago that Glenn Boeshaar announced to you that God had called my time with you to a close as I moved on to become the Stated Clerk of our denomination, the Evangelical Presbyterian Church. I can assure you that being the national head of a denomination is very different from being the pastor of a local church. Probably the most dramatic difference is this: I do my current ministry in a non-resident capacity. I spend about 180 days a year at home, about 90 days a year at our corporate office outside of Detroit, Michigan, and I spend about 90 days a year visiting EPC churches and presbyteries around the country. I’ve enjoyed representing us on two trips to South America as well. I can sum up my last three years with one word: change. As our world is changing dramatically, we as a church are in the midst of significant change. In June, at our national meeting (the General Assembly), we affirmed that we are now a denomination of missional churches, in addition to Presbyterian, evangelical, and reformed. This in part is recognition that the 21st century is dramatically different from the 20th when it comes to proclaiming the salvation that is found only in Jesus Christ to our community, country, and world. Declaring we’re missional is acknowledging that we exist and minister in a mission field, even in the United States. We’re committed to taking the life-saving gospel of Jesus Christ to the ends of the earth and to the end of the street. That’s one big change. Another change is that in the last two years we’ve grown from 185 churches to about 290 churches. Almost all of those churches are coming from the liberal, mainline Presbyterian denomination that we departed from more than twenty years ago. Those are two big changes taking place. This may come as a surprise to you: do you know that there are some people don’t like change? Even if it’s a change for the good, even if it’s a change that we believe God is directing. Leading our churches and leaders through change into the future is probably my most pressing and important responsibility and ensures that it’s never a dull moment for me. In the midst of all this, to continue to call First EPC our church home is a huge blessing to Cindy and me. Whenever I think of you all the words the Apostle Paul come to mind: “I thank my God every time I remember you. In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with gratitude and joy because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now.” Thank you for all you did across the twelve years we were together to equip me for my current ministry for Jesus Christ! I always look forward to worshiping with you, and I want you to know how pleased I am that Don Broadwater has been called to serve as an Assistant Pastor. You have not been fully staffed since I left three years ago. With Don and Gloria you’re there, and I know God has great things in store for you and your ministry for Jesus Christ in the months ahead. My mentor Dick Halverson said, “Never stop learning. Once you stop learning you stop living. Once you stop living you start dying.” So I’ve committed myself to be a life-long learner. I’d like to share some things I’ve learned in the last three years.

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.*

My first point is the Grand Purpose. Have you had an important decision to make and you asked the question, “What is God’s will, His purpose for my life?” Across my 29 years of ministry that’s probably in the top three questions I’ve been asked: “Jeff, I have an important decision to make about my job; will you help me determine what God’s will is for me?” “Jeff, I have an important decision to make about a relationship, or where to live, or where to go to college; will you help me decide what God’s purpose is in my life?” And then that friend will cite with confidence Romans 8:28: “And we know that for those who love God all things work for good, for those who are called according to His purpose.”

At important junctures of our lives it’s very normal for us as followers of Jesus Christ to look to God and expect Him to reveal His will to us. The good news is that He is faithful and good and reveals that will to us over and over and over. And yet I have to say that this is not the full, the complete intention of the great truth that we affirm at these times of decision. Saving you in Jesus Christ, God is interested in a lot more than just that job, relationship, school, or vocation, as important as they are. His grand purpose in exercising His sovereignty in your life is not simply to show you the way and guide you along the path of life, but that’s what we can too easily conclude if we stop at the end of verse 28. And that’s what I’m afraid we do. I know I’ve done it, and I’ve been a believer for more than forty years. Verse 29 tells us what God’s intention is in calling you and working in your life according to His purpose: “For those 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.” If you’re taking notes, won’t you please underline “conformed to the image of his Son”? The point here, and it’s my first one, is that while God will guide and reveal His will to you as you seek Him, especially at those big, defining decision points of your life, His grand purpose is this: no matter where your life takes you, He is committed to conforming you to the image of His Son. That is, to transform you, to change you, to make you just like His Son Jesus Christ. Second Corinthians 3:18 says the same thing: “we...are being transformed into his likeness” (the likeness of whom? Jesus Christ) “with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.” If you’re a believer in Jesus Christ you should embrace change in your life because it’s clear evidence that God is working, working powerfully in you.

My second point is a focused purpose. This is set in contrast to the reality that the way we understand and apply this phrase, “conformed to the image” of Jesus Christ reveals what we think it means to be “Christ-like,” and ultimately what it means to be a Christian. Let me give you three examples I’ve come across repeatedly in the last three years. The first is what I’d call the active example. For this person, to be conformed to the image of Christ means doing, being actively engaged in the causes he believes Jesus would certainly support if He were on earth today. “Justice” is the word that drives this person. It’s all about social justice, economic justice, ecological justice, environmental justice, gender justice; the list goes on and on. I’m talking here about liberal Christians. They say, “Look at what I do, that’s what makes me a Christian.” Earlier this month I represented the EPC at the 150th anniversary celebration of the establishment of the Brazilian Presbyterian Church in Rio de Janeiro. This church was established by an American Presbyterian missionary in 1859. This was not only a major church event in Brazil; it was also a major civic event as well. The special events of this celebration were reported on by the media. At one of those events the President of Brazil came and spoke for an hour. My hosts assured me that President Lula was not a believer in Jesus Christ. So I was surprised when he said at one point, “I am a Christian.” He continued, “Jesus came for the poor, and I came to the presidency for the poor.” This is an illustration of the inclusiveness of liberal Christianity. They aren’t too concerned about what you think or believe about Jesus Christ, if you’re committed to this agenda for action, you will be embraced.

The second example is what I’d call the affective response. For this man or woman, to become more and more like Christ means having mountaintop experiences. We’re talking emotional highs, speaking in tongues, pursuing the miraculous, believing God for all His great promises, especially those of prosperity and well-being. Here I’m talking about Pentecostal Christians. They say, “Look at what I experience, that’s what makes me a Christian.” This is how I was publicly introduced in Argentina and Brazil this month, “Dr. Jeffrey Jeremiah, Stated Clerk of the (garbled) Presbyterian Church.” I’m exaggerating, but not by much. In South America, an evangelical Christian is equated with Pentecostalism and the health and wealth gospel (“believe God and He will make you healthy and wealthy”). My hosts did not want my audience to tie the EPC with that!

The third example is the cognitive one. To become more like Christ means accumulating more and more knowledge, especially knowledge of God’s Word. Words like orthodoxy, doctrine, and truth are very important to this person. He (or she) says, “Look at what I know, that’s what makes me a Christian.” I’ve found that most people in our church gravitate to this third example, this intellectual response, for good reason. Knowledge is critically important to biblical Christianity. God has given us His word so that we can know Him, His Son, and His gospel. The problem is that it’s not the case that more knowledge, even knowledge of God’s Word, necessarily means that we’re being conformed to the image of Jesus Christ. It’s possible to know a lot about Jesus Christ and yet not know Him at all. It’s possible to know facts about Jesus and yet not show any proof that this knowledge is making us more and more like Jesus Christ. We all know people like this, don’t we? Someone who has a lot of head knowledge, but they also have a proud, critical spirit. In my experience they aren’t nice to be around. There was a group of Christians like this in the church in Corinth. They thought knowledge in and of itself was the key to growth and maturity. What’s interesting is that when Paul addressed them he didn’t attack them for their pursuit of knowledge, he commended them for it, and then he told them the ultimate of their quest. He declared to them in I Corinthians 12:31 not a better way, but the most excellent way (verse 31 of I Corinthians chapter 12). That’s the way of love. From I Corinthians 13:4: “Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices in the truth. It always protects, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails.” It is said that these words are a description of Jesus Christ, so that you can insert Jesus’ name here for love: “Jesus is patient, Jesus is kind. Jesus does not envy, does not boast, He is not proud.” Then, of course, if this is a description of Jesus, then this is God’s purpose for your life because it’s a description of what it means to be like Jesus, to be conformed to the image of your Savior and Lord. You can insert your own name into these verses and ask, “Am I patient, am I kind, do I refuse to delight in evil, but rejoice in the truth”? If I look back over the last year or five years, am I becoming more and more like this, more and more like Jesus Christ? How would your spouse, parents, children, friends respond? Let me confess something to you: I used to have a very content-focused, knowledge-driven devotional life. I would open up my head and just pour it in: God’s truth, knowledge about God and His Word and His Son. I don’t do that much anymore. Passages like Romans 8:28 and 29, I Corinthians 13, the fruit of the Spirit of Jesus Christ in Galatians 5:22-23 get a lot of my attention now. My focus each day is on Jesus Christ and one characteristic of my Savior and Lord. With His help I want to see that quality: joy, patience, love, generosity, purity, faithfulness, hope, whatever can become more and more a part of my heart and mind, my feelings, words, and actions.

James 1:5 promises, “If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given to Him.” The good news is that when we really want to know God’s purpose, He does reveal it to us. He’s there; He’s available when we face major decisions in our lives. But knowing His sovereign and loving wisdom at that decision point is only scratching the surface of His plan for you. His great purpose is to make you just like His Son Jesus, Christ-like. The image of Christ in your life isn’t revealed by asking, “Look at what I do,” “Look at what I feel,” or “Look at what I know.” It’s revealed by asking, “Look at who I am, and who I am becoming” – like my Savior, my Lord Jesus.