

“In God’s Hands”

“We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.”

“You’re in good hands.”

One summer during my student years, I worked as a night janitor at the headquarters of Allstate Insurance, one of the largest insurance companies in North America. For decades, Allstate has been known for their slogan “*you’re in good hands with Allstate,*” and the company often identifies itself as “*the Good Hands People.*” As I was cleaning the offices, I noticed that this slogan was featured in almost every room in the building, reinforcing to both employees and customers that Allstate was a company in which one could place one’s trust, especially at moments when insurance is needed the most. Through their reassuring slogan, Allstate was seeking to instill in those who had insurance with the company that the company could be trusted in moments when insurance is most needed, such as a house fire, an auto accident, or the death of a loved one.

Being in “good hands” is a metaphor for being in a place of trust, reassured that the person or company in which we have placed our confidence will be there when we need them. When Susan was preparing for her recent surgery, both her surgeon and anesthesiologist reassured her that she was in good hands, and she placed her trust in them during her operation. When tax season comes around, many of us place our trust in accountants and tax experts, believing that we will be in “good hands” as we entrust to them the task of preparing our tax returns that will hopefully result in a refund. When I take my cars into my mechanic, I have confidence that I will be in “good hands” as they repair and maintain my vehicles, since I have no skills or knowledge beyond driving a car and filling the tank with gas. When we believe that we are in “good hands,” it means that we believe that we are in “*the care of a person or people who are able to care for someone or something well.*” (Dictionary.com).

Place our trust or confidence in a person or company involves some degree of risk, especially if we know little about their background or track record. While many people and organizations have proven themselves trustworthy, nothing that involves human beings is foolproof; humanity is by definition flawed, and even those with

the best intentions may make mistakes that can result in serious consequences. We may believe that we are in “good hands” with someone we have known and trusted in the past, but there is always the possibility that they may make a mistake or an error of omission that may place us in a position of loss and even danger. There is no absolute guarantee that someone promises us that we are in “good hands” will always be able to deliver on that promise.

Paul’s letters are addressed to people who have placed their trust and confidence in their faith in Jesus Christ as Lord, but who have experienced great disappointment from those in whom they had previously believed that they were in “good hands.” To confess Jesus as their Saviour in the first century was often seen by others as an act of betrayal of their family’s faith, an act of disloyalty to their community and trade, and even an act of treason at a time when the Roman Emperor was worshipped as a God. Because they openly confessed that Jesus Christ is “*the way, the truth, and the life*” and that “*no one comes to the Father except through me*” (John 14:6), they were often disinherited by their family, dismissed from their jobs, driven out of their communities, and stripped of their citizenship. Everything upon which they had relied had been taken from them; they had discovered that the ones who had promised that they were in “good hands” had proved to be unreliable.

Paul is aware that the Christians in Rome have undoubtedly suffered the same fate because of their confession of the Christian faith. Unlike other letters written to communities with which he was well acquainted (such as Corinth), the letter to the Romans is an introductory letter from the Apostle to a community he hopes to visit in the future. While it contains less of the personal aspects of other letters, Romans is Paul’s greatest testament to his apostolic proclamation of the Christian faith; for Martin Luther, Romans is the most important book of the New Testament, since it contains “*the gospel in its purest form.*” To a people whose confidence has been betrayed and who may have difficulty placing themselves into the hands of anyone, Paul writes of the one source of trust and confidence which is unfailing, the one in whom we can place ourselves knowing that we will always be in “good hands” that will never fail nor betray us. We can have confidence both in the present and in the future because that future is in God’s hands, not ours. Being a Christian means that one places all of their trust and hope in God who has been revealed to us as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, knowing that Jesus Christ is the solid rock upon which our faith is built, and that even in times of greatest distress “*the steadfast love of the LORD never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.*” (Lamentations 3:22-23).

- “If it depended on us, we could expect more of the same botching of human chances with which history is replete. Only because God has taken control of our future is our future redemption secure ... Because we are in God’s hands, the kind of God who sent his Son for us, all things will finally resolve into good.” – Paul Achtemeier.

Our confidence is sure precisely because our future is not in our hands or the hands of other human beings or institutions and does not depend on our faithfulness or ability to be true to God. Rather, Christian hope is grounded in the sure and certain promises of God, the God who “*proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us.*” (Romans 5:8). It may be said that Paul’s message is “*the 911 of every Christian believer because the entire chapter is indeed a prayer template, one to be used at any given moment by all those who believe in God, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit.*” (Israel Kamudzandu).

Our confidence that we are always in God’s loving presence, in the “good hands” of God, is rooted in the knowledge that the Holy Spirit abides with us always. It is the gift of the Holy Spirit that enabled the apostles to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ on the day of Pentecost, so that people from all nations could “*hear the speaking about God’s deeds of power*” (Acts 2:11). In his Farewell Discourse to his disciples shortly before his Crucifixion, Jesus promises his followers that “*I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you.*” (John 14:16-17). The promise of the Holy Spirit is our assurance that God is with us always, and we can place ourselves in God’s “good hands” knowing that God will never fail us, never abandon us, and will always fulfill all that God has promised us. Paul builds on this faith when he proclaims to the Romans that “*likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words*” (Romans 8:26). The Holy Spirit intercedes within the Christian precisely at the point where they, faced with the ruin and misery of the world, find that there are no words to express in God’s presence the futility and the longing for redemption. The Spirit is present for “*those who cannot see that for which they eagerly need assistance to peer into the darkness ahead and pray God’s future into the present; it is that assistance that the Spirit provides.*” (N.T. Wright). It is precisely at the point of weakness and uncertainty, of inability and struggle, when the Christian experiences the presence of God in the abiding presence of the Holy Spirit; because we know that we are in good hands because we are in God’s hands, Paul can state with confidence that “*we know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.*”

(8:28). By “all things,” Paul is speaking of the entire range of experiences and events that may face God’s people; even in moments of greatest distress and the suffering of which Paul had previously warned his readers (“*we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him*” – 8:17), Christians have the confidence that it is the will of God to renew the whole creation and his people along with it. The heart of Paul’s argument for assurance is the unshakable and sovereign love of God, and the certainty that this love will win out in the end. This love is certain for those who keep the most basic command of the Torah, the *shema*: “*Hear, O Israel: the LORD is our God, the LORD alone. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.*” (Deuteronomy 6:4-5). Jesus identified the *shema* as one of the two greatest commandments when he replied to a question from the Pharisees as which of the commandments of the Torah was the greatest:

- “He said to them, ‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and first commandment. And the second is like it: “you shall love your neighbour as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.” – Matthew 22:37-40.

The people of God in Christ and by the Holy Spirit are the “God lovers,” the true law keepers, the true Israel. For those who thus love God, God works out all things together for good. This same people are those who are now “*called according to his purpose*”; that purpose – that God would sum up all things in Christ, that God would be all in all, and that the whole creation would be liberated into the freedom that goes with the glorification of God’s children – was always designed to be fulfilled through the agency of God’s image-bearing children. “*Those in Christ are the people through whom God intends to accomplish this task.*” (Wright).

God’s plan from the start was to create a Christ-shaped family, a renewed human race modeled on God’s Son. This process will bring God’s renewed people to the point where they will reflect God’s image, just as the Son is the true image of God (“*He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation*” – Colossians 1:15). As true image-bearers, God’s people are to reflect that same image into the world, bringing to creation the healing freedom and life for which it longs, To be conformed to the image of God, or of God’s Son, is a dynamic, not a static, concept; “*reflecting God into the world is a matter of costly vocation.*” (Wright).

God’s purposes for those in Christ are precisely Christ-shaped. They are chosen and called to advance God’s purpose in and for the world. God’s “knowing”, and “call”

are not just for prophets and apostles but for all God's people, each in their own vocation and fashion, but all according to the same pattern in Christ. As Paul will state later in the letter, *"as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another."* (12:4). Paul proclaims that *"those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of the Son, in order that he might be the firstborn within a large family"* (8:29). Paul's understanding of "predestined" (*proorisen*) is not in a deterministic or fatalistic sense; rather, it speaks of God's action in setting people apart for a particular purpose, a purpose in which a loving and obedient response is all-important. Paul uses the words "foreknew" and "predestined" to point to the fact that God knows the end to which he will bring his creation, namely redemption, and that that destiny is firmly set in God's purposes. For Paul, the "call" is what happens when, through the preaching of the gospel, the Spirit works in the heart to produce faith, hope, and love. Not all hearers of the gospel respond in faith, but when people do Paul describes the event as their being "called" by God:

- "For we know, brothers and sisters, beloved by God, that he has chosen you, because our message of the gospel came to you not in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and in full conviction, just as you know what kind of persons we proved to be among you for your sake." – 1 Thessalonians 1:4-5.

Those whom God called God also justified; God's people now rejoice in the hope of the glory of God. Since God's love has done for Christians all that has been done in Christ, there is no power that can shake that love now or turn it aside from completing its task. The love of God, enjoyed already in the present, will outlast and defeat all enemies, including death itself: *"Love is the ultimate assurance, stronger than logic ... an experienced fact, something that cannot be denied anymore than one can stop breathing"* (Wright). It is based on this sure and certain hope that is ours in Christ Jesus our Lord that Paul presents an argument through a series of seven rhetorical questions, each of which is followed not by an answer to the question itself but by a statement that shows that the answer must be "nobody." He begins with the questions *"what are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us?"* (8:31). Elsewhere, Paul has used "for us" in reference to the death of Jesus (*"And the life I now live in the flesh I live in faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me."* – Galatians 2:20). In declaring that "God is for us," Paul proclaims that there is one God, and that if this God is on our side, then no force on earth or elsewhere can stand against us. God's willingness to give up his only Son is cited as the key evidence for God's utter reliability: *"He who did*

not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else?” (8:32). Because God is the justifier, and because the Messiah has died *“for us and for our salvation”* (Apostles Creed), was raised, and now intercedes for us, there can be no one who can *“bring any charge against God’s elect,”* or no one who *“is to condemn”* (8:33-34). The love of God, shown forth in the Messiah, forms the unbreakable bond between God and the believer; for *“it is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us.”* Because of this unbreakable bond and this steadfast assurance that is ours in Christ Jesus, Paul asks if there is anyone or any force that *“will separate us from the love of Christ?”* (8:35). He presents a formidable list of potential enemies who seem bent on separating believers from God’s love; Paul must list them, place the conflict with them on the map of God’s purposes for the chosen people, and declare that *“hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword”* will not succeed in separating God’s people from God’s love in Christ Jesus. Even though we may find that, in the words of Psalm 44:22, that *“for your sake we are being killed all day long; we are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered”* (8:36), Paul cries out in exuberant faith that *“in all things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us”* (8:37). Paul’s faith is rooted in the victory that, as Easter has proven, had already been won on the Cross and would finally be won at the moment of complete liberation. *“We are more than conquerors”* is a present reality in faith for those living on the basis of that past and in the hope of that future. Because of this sure and certain hope that is ours in the death and resurrection of Christ, Paul proclaims that *“I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord”* (8:38-39). Death for Paul remained the last greatest enemy (*“The last enemy to be destroyed is death”* – 1 Corinthians 15:26). *“Life”* is the present with all its delights and problems that is a potential separator between God and the believers. *“Angels, rulers, and powers”* might try to break the bond of love between God and the church, but they are a defeated rabble (*“He disarmed the rulers and authorities and made a public example of them, triumphing over them in it.”* – Colossians 2:15). Time present and time future, space high and low can have no power to break the love God has for those in the Messiah. No dimension of reality one can imagine has the power to frustrate God care and love for God’s people.

- *“Christian assurance, despite caricatures, is the very opposite of human arrogance; it is the fruit of humble, trusting faith. Those who follow their Messiah into the valley of the shadow of death will find that they need fear no evil. Though they sometimes seem sheep to the slaughter, yet they may trust*

the Shepherd, whose love will follow them all the days of their lives.” – Wright.

It is often necessary in life to place our trust in others to provide for us what we cannot provide for ourselves. While experience has taught us that there are often people and institutions with whom we have earned our trust, in whom we are in “good hands,” experience has also taught us that nothing that is human can be trusted with absolute certainty. But our faith in Christ Jesus gives us the blessed assurance that in the Lord we are always in “good hands” because we are in **God’s hands**, that “*in Christ the solid rock I stand, all other ground is sinking sand.*” Because we know that God’s promises are always trustworthy and true, we can “*cast all your anxiety on him, because he cares for you*” (1 Peter 5:7). We know that God will “*take my hand and lead me upon life’s way,*” that “*I have blessed peace with my Lord so near, leaning on the everlasting arms.*” No matter what circumstances we may find ourselves, even in life’s darkest moments, we have that blessed assurance that as God’s people we are in good hands – we are in God’s hands!

Amen.